

Sam Storms

Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #57

May 15, 2022

Welcoming and Pleasing Others to the Glory of God

Romans 15:1-7

Today, I want us to start at the end of our passage, rather than at its beginning. We read in v. 7, “Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” Here we are not only told what to do, but why. The end game, as it were, is made explicit. We are to strive in God’s grace to be a hospitable people, and the reason why is so that God may be glorified. Now, how did Paul get there? What led him to this conclusion, and how does it affect the way we approach life together here at Bridgeway Church?

The answer begins with an understanding of the critical importance of hospitality in the local church. That may not sound terribly exciting. It doesn’t carry a lot of buzz. To put it in the language of the culture: it ain’t sexy! But it is virtually impossible to overemphasize the importance in Scripture of the practice of hospitality. Let me just give you a few examples.

We’ve already seen this in Romans. Back in chapter twelve Paul exhorted us to “seek to show hospitality” (Rom. 12:13). When Paul listed for us the qualifications for a man who would serve as an elder in the local church, among the many things he said was that he must be “hospitable” (1 Tim. 3:2; see also Titus 1:8). The apostle Peter agrees with Paul. “Show hospitality to one another without grumbling,” he wrote in 1 Peter 4:9. We don’t know who wrote Hebrews, but whoever it was concurred with Paul and Peter: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Heb. 13:2).

The word most often translated “hospitable” in the NT literally means, “lover of strangers.” I think one reason why we find this emphasis in the Bible is because sincere, heartfelt hospitality is so contrary to our fallen souls. We are by nature selfish, self-protective, self-seeking people, and hospitality demands that we step outside of our self-oriented shells and greet and welcome and serve others. Most of us are by nature the sort who prefer to remain safely inside our personal cocoon and associate only with those we know and love and are persuaded they love us as well.

But there is another reason why the NT mentions hospitality so often. It is because of what Paul says here in Romans 15. When we “welcome one another” and are graciously hospitable we put God’s glory on display. Look again at v. 7. “Welcome one another . . . for the glory of God.” Now, how in the world does something so seemingly mundane as hospitality serve to bring attention to the glory and greatness of God?

All of you know the opening words in our mission statement: “We exist to exalt Christ in the City, through joyful satisfaction in him.” And here Paul is saying in no uncertain terms, that when we are so thoroughly and joyfully satisfied in Jesus and overwhelmed with gratitude for the fact that he has accepted us that we happily welcome others, we put his glory on display. When we respond to and welcome others in the same way that he responded to and welcomed us, he is magnified. His grace and glory are put on display.

We began today at the end so that we would feel the full force of our responsibility to warmly, lovingly, sincerely, and passionately welcome with Christ-exalting hospitality those who come to us and also those who are already here with whom we may be in disagreement on some secondary issue. So, now the time has come for us to go back to the beginning and see how Paul arrived at his conclusion in v. 7.

A Word of Exhortation to the Strong (vv. 1-2)

Some of you may not be aware of the fact that, in its original form, there were no divisions in the NT between verses and chapters. They all ran together as one. The chapter divisions, such as that between Romans 14 and Romans 15, were not added until the year 1205 by a man named Stephen Langton. The verse divisions were added to the NT by Robert Stephanus in 1551. So, whereas the very words of Scripture are inspired and infallible, the identification of each verse and chapter by number was purely arbitrary and are often wrong and misleading. We see that today in our passage.

To conclude Romans 14 in the way you see it in your Bible was, in my humble opinion, a mistake. The more natural break would be after Romans 15:13. As you will recall, Romans 14 was devoted to the issue of the strong and the weak in the body of Christ and how they are to treat one another. And that is precisely what Paul continues to discuss in chapter fifteen. Romans 15:1 opens with the statement: “We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.”

I mention the poor choice that was made to divide Romans 14 from Romans 15 only so that you will understand that Paul is still discussing the relationship between the strong and the weak in the body of Christ. So, by way of a brief reminder, the strong are those who understand the truth that nothing is unclean in itself, that all food and drink is available to the believer and that we should not refrain for conscience' sake from freely partaking. The weak Christian, on the other hand, does not possess that knowledge. He/she does not fully understand the beauty of Christian liberty. The weak believer is timid about such matters. They lack the confidence seen in the strong. They are easily intimidated and pressured into doing something that would violate their conscience. They entertain scruples on matters of secondary importance. Whereas the strong will eat meat and drink wine, always in moderation of course, the weak will abstain, perhaps for fear of being defiled or contaminated or spiritually infected in some way.

This, then, is what Paul means when he speaks here in v. 1 of the “*failings*” of the weak. He isn't talking about moral failure, as if they have sinned. Nor is he talking about physical weakness. The way in which the weak “fail” or fall short is in their inability to understand the freedom they have with regard to secondary issues such as what to eat and drink and whether certain days are more holy than others.

And so Paul continues his discussion of this issue by opening Romans 15 with an exhortation to the strong. And note well that Paul clearly sides with the strong. He himself is strong. “*We* who are strong,” says the apostle, have an obligation to deal gently and lovingly with our weaker brothers and sisters.

We saw in Romans 14:13-23 that when Paul here speaks of “bearing” with the weak he most likely means that we should be ready, willing, and able to forego the exercise of our entirely legitimate liberty for the sake of the weaker brother/sister. He’s not telling the strong that they should adopt the scruples of the weak, as if the weak are ultimately correct in their conclusions and the strong are in error. If anything, Paul wants the weak to become strong. He never tells the strong to embrace for themselves the “failings” of the weak.

His point, then, is that if by the exercise of our freedom in eating and drinking we cause or influence or induce a weaker believer to eat or drink in violation of their conscience, we are not walking according to love. Pleasing ourselves by the exercise of our liberty is not the highest priority for the Christian. We are first and foremost to seek to please our “neighbor” (i.e., the weak), our fellow believer. In making a decision on when and where and whether to exercise our liberty, our first consideration should be the “good” of our fellow Christian so that he/she may be edified or built up in Christ Jesus.

Paul doesn’t want you to think that Christian liberty is a bad thing. It is a wonderful gift of God’s grace. We are to celebrate it, enjoy it, and defend it. But not at the expense of the spiritual welfare of a weaker brother or sister. The enjoyment of Christian liberty is a good thing. It just isn’t the best thing. Serving our fellow believer for his/her good and growth is much better.

One word of clarification. In v. 2 Paul encourages us to “please” our “neighbor” in the local church. This is not the same thing that we find in Galatians 1:10 when Paul denounces efforts to “please men.” In Galatians he’s talking about the temptation to compromise the gospel and ignore the hard and challenging truths of Scripture in order to secure the praise of people in the world. He’s denouncing those who would ignore God and curry favor with people in order to advance themselves in society. But here in Romans 15:2 he’s talking about sacrificing the exercise of freedom in order to bless and “please” others rather than ourselves. In other words, Paul is not talking here about pleasing people rather than God, but of pleasing ourselves rather than others.

An Illustration

I wonder sometimes if we have lost sight of how horrific rejection can be and how wonderful acceptance and love are. Let me give you an example.

There are certain events in all of our lives that leave an indelible print on our minds and that are virtually impossible to forget. To this day, I can still recall something I saw on December 30, 1987. That’s right, this is something that I witnessed nearly 35 years ago. It was shown on ABC World News Tonight. The report concerned a group of young people referred to in the program as Amerasians. That is probably not a good label today, but that is what was used in 1987. These young people were the consequence of momentary sexual encounters between American soldiers and Vietnamese women. They were conceived

and born in a time of turmoil, what we know today as the Vietnam War that began in the early 1960's and wasn't ended until early in the 1970's.

These young people, quite tragically, found themselves as outcasts from society. In Vietnam they were rejected as half-breeds, a horrible way of describing them; but such was the ugly reality of that time. They suffered scorn and ridicule in their homeland. They had few friends, and even fewer opportunities for advancement. They had no home and very little hope for much of a future.

A large number of these Amerasians made their way to the United States, hoping to find love and acceptance from their biological fathers. In some cases, they did. But far more frequently the story was one of rejection. The news broadcast on this particular night focused on one teenaged girl who came to the U.S. and contacted her father. When she first reached him on the phone, he refused even to acknowledge that she existed. He wanted nothing to do with her. Rejection, once again. She then described how she finally went to his home and just stood there, outside, looking in. She knocked on the door, but he refused to answer. She left a note in the mailbox, but he never responded. Eventually, she just walked away, rejected.

The picture of that young teenaged girl, by that time approaching the age of 20, has never left me. The pain of rejection was etched all across her face. I can't imagine a more painful experience than the one she endured. This is just one story of how devastating rejection is and how important love and acceptance and just plain old hospitality can be.

Dr. Larry Crabb, a dear friend of mine who died only last year, wrote in many of his books that the two most fundamental human needs are significance and security. Many have criticized Larry for this, but I still find considerable truth in what he said. By "significance" Larry referred to our need to feel a sense of purpose and importance in life, a sense of being adequate for a job, a feeling that our lives actually matter. By "security" Larry meant acceptance. The desire of every human heart is to be accepted, loved, received, and embraced in relationship. Most human problems, Larry contended, were due to the failure of a human soul to experience both significance and security. As Larry wrote in one of his books, "people pursue irresponsible ways of living as a means of defending against feelings of **insignificance** and **insecurity**."

We see this very issue here in Romans 15. The "weak" believer in Romans 14 and 15 struggled to feel secure in their relationship with others in the church. They felt as if the strong looked down their noses at them. They sensed the sting of disdain and rejection. They felt like second-class citizens in the kingdom of God. They couldn't escape the feeling of being spiritually inferior. And Paul won't have it! And neither should we.

The issue in the church in Rome wasn't the same as that encountered by the Amerasian young people who came to America after the Vietnam War, but the principle at work is the same. In the case of the Roman church in the first century, and the same circumstances can exist in our day as well, the strong and the weak were judging each other and rejecting each other because of their difference of opinion on secondary matters, matters unrelated to our salvation and acceptance with God. The division may also have entailed a racial dimension, as the weak were most likely Jewish Christians while the strong were Gentile believers. Of course, there were exceptions to this, as Paul himself was a Jewish Christian but identified himself as being among the strong (15:1a).

So, what is Paul's counsel to the strong? The answer is that they must "bear with" the shortcomings and weaknesses of those who don't fully grasp the implications of Christian liberty on secondary matters. To these weak brothers and sisters, they weren't secondary; they were primary. They lived in fear that if they partook of meat and wine they would lapse in their Christian walk; they would fall short of pleasing God with their lives; they would likely suffer some sort of spiritual defilement. And Paul's counsel to the strong is simple and to the point: "bear" (v. 1) with them, "welcome" (v. 7) them as fellow believers who are just as loved and accepted by God as the strong. Only in this way will all of you in a local church be united so that God is glorified in your lives and your worship (v. 6).

Paul is quite clear that *the strong hold the key to Christian unity*. The ultimate responsibility for unity in the church is theirs. If they, or Paul would say, if "we" dogmatically insist on holding our ground and demanding that others tolerate our exercise of liberty, the gulf between the two groups will only widen and disunity will prevail. The initiative, therefore, rests with those of us who are strong.

In Romans 14, I answered the question of why Paul puts the burden on the strong, but let me say it again today. The weak are, as it were, locked in by their conscience. They are not capable of doing anything else, for to do so would be a violation of their belief about what is right and wrong. Their belief may well be misguided, but the fact remains that because of it they have no room to maneuver. Their conscience is bound in such a way that they lack the flexibility to embrace another practice. But we who are strong can do what they can't. We can easily forego our liberty for their sake, and that is what Paul is calling for.

When he says in v. 1 that we should "bear with" the weak he doesn't mean that we are simply to tolerate them or put up with them, as if he were endorsing an attitude of mere resignation or condescending acquiescence. Rather, Paul is calling on the strong to lovingly uphold and carry along the weak so that he will be encouraged and strengthened, and hopefully will grow strong.

Paul's counsel that we should not "please ourselves" doesn't mean we must always defer to the whims and wishes of others, no matter what they demand or expect of us. He doesn't mean we should never do things that we find pleasing or joyful. He is simply saying that in this one issue you who are strong must give greater consideration and priority to the spiritual welfare of your weaker brother or sister.

"Ouch!" says the strong. "That's an unbearable weight you've placed on us, Paul. To live in such a way that others are pleased is taxing and tiring and inconvenient." Perhaps, says Paul, but remember: that is precisely what Jesus did for you. To this we turn our attention to v. 3.

The Example of Jesus in Seeking to Please Others (v. 3)

The word "for" with which v. 3 begins is explicit and unavoidable. Paul is giving us the grounds or the basis or the reason why we should happily embrace this call. It is because that is precisely what Jesus did when he entered this world and suffered in our place. Do you remember how Paul expressed this in Philippians 2 – "[although] he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And

being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:6-8).

Whatever inconveniences or reproach or sacrifices the strong must endure in order to please their weaker brothers and sisters, it can never compare with the inconvenience and pain and reproach that Jesus endured for you and me, to reconcile us to God.

Here Paul quotes Psalm 69:9. In that OT text David describes how the insults and rejection and reproach that were directed primarily at God have fallen on him. Paul takes that obviously messianic psalm and applies it to Jesus. He willingly became the target of all human hatred of God, for you and me! How, then, can we possibly be so ungrateful and self-centered to refuse to show toward our fellow believers a love that is by comparison so much less demanding?

The Sanctifying and Empowering Influence of the OT Scriptures (vv. 4-5)

I want you to follow Paul’s train of thought here. It’s incredibly important. His point, as you can clearly see, is to direct our attention to Jesus and the sacrifice he made to please us, to save us, rather than to please himself. But why didn’t Paul refer to something in the life of Jesus as recorded in the four gospels? There are numerous incidents that he could have mentioned to illustrate the depth of sacrifice Jesus made for our salvation. But instead, he goes to a statement by David in Psalm 69:9. He cites a text from the Old Testament, written at least a thousand years before Jesus came to earth. Why?

I think the answer is that he wanted to highlight for us ***the power and influence of the Old Testament Scriptures***. Far too many Christians think little of the OT. At best they look at it in the rearview mirror of their lives, as if it were an irrelevant group of stories long since passed. But in citing Psalm 69 Paul is reminding us of the life-changing, heart-shaping power of the entire Bible.

When he speaks of “whatever was written in former days” he obviously means the books of the Old Testament. They are there to instruct us. It is true that we are no longer under the dictates of the Mosaic Law. We live under the New Covenant. But that doesn’t mean we can simply ignore what was written before, for the sake of Israel. We can learn glorious truths and practical principles and gain insights into the nature of God by meditating on and memorizing and carefully studying the inspired OT text.

In fact, when we are tempted to give up, the truths of the OT serve to impart to us endurance. When we are convinced that our only option is to quit and abandon the faith, the OT awakens in us hope. It is used by the Holy Spirit to infuse into our hearts and minds countless reasons to persevere. If we are discouraged and find little reason to press on, where do we look to find energy and strength to maintain our hope? From the Scriptures, says Paul! Encouragement doesn’t fall from heaven like manna. It doesn’t float in the air or appear out of nowhere. God has ordained that we find encouragement by means of and through the instrument of the inspired texts of the OT!

There is a disturbing trend among certain professing evangelicals to dismiss the OT as beneath the dignity of God. Although they agree that the Spirit of God inspired the OT, they don’t look to it for instruction or

for truth concerning the nature of God. They contend that the books and stories of the OT are the record of a primitive people, Israel, who embraced distorted views of God. The OT Scriptures are not God's revelation of what he is truly like. They simply portray for us what an unenlightened and barbaric people thought of God. It is simply a record of their misguided beliefs and not God's personal revelation of his own nature and will. It is only with the revelation that came with Jesus that we see more clearly the true character of who God is and why he does what he does.

They do this largely because they don't like certain events in the OT and are convinced that God would never do such things. They have in mind things such as the great flood that destroyed the entire world except for Noah and his family. They would also point to God's commandment that Joshua and Israel eradicate the Canaanites from the land. They are persuaded that these stories are inconsistent with the character of God as revealed in the person of Jesus.

But they have a difficult time explaining Jesus' own perspective on the OT. He frequently appealed to stories and individuals and events in the OT to make his point. He declared unequivocally in John 10:35 that the Scripture "cannot be broken," and by Scripture he was referring to the OT. And Paul, with the OT Scriptures clearly in mind, asserted in 2 Timothy 3:16 that "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."

It's as if Paul pauses right in the middle of his argument about how the strong should be willing to sacrifice for the sake of the weak and says: "While I'm at it, in citing an OT text about what Jesus freely and joyfully did for our sake, I want you to see the vital role that the Bible plays in your experience and in your spiritual growth and in your capacity to endure hardship. If you want to have hope, immerse yourself in the inspired Word of God."

I've said this countless times before and I want to say it again today, and I do so on the basis of Paul's statement here in v. 4, that there is little long-lasting help that comes from anecdotal sermons and topical discussions about issues in our society. That isn't the way that God intends to sustain your heart and give you hope. I could entertain you with clever turns of phrase and humorous stories and make you laugh and cry with manipulative little vignettes. But that would do nothing to help you endure and persevere and find encouragement in difficult times. God's ordained means, the method by which he does this for us is through the truths of the inspired biblical text. Saturate your mind in the written Word of God!

Look closely at v. 5. Here we are told that "endurance and encouragement" ultimately come from God. You won't find them in any of the self-help books at Barnes & Noble. You won't find them in the counsel of Dr. Phil. The ability and power and incentive to endure and to be encouraged come from God. But how does God bring them to bear in our lives? By what means does he impart them to weary and weakened souls? ***It is "through" the Scriptures!***

And the "harmony" or unity to which Paul calls the strong and the weak is not a demand that they end up agreeing with each other on matters of behavior such as eating, drinking, and observing certain days as special. Paul was not so naïve as to think that this would automatically come as a result of his exhortation. He's calling on them to share a common vision that serves to magnify the glory of God. Be united in the primary truths of the gospel. It would be wonderful if the weak and the strong could agree on secondary matters, but far more important to the apostle is that they are unified on the primary issues.

The Goal (vv. 6-7)

What is the ultimate aim in all of this? With what final goal in mind does Paul urge us to bear with the failings of the weak? Why, in the final analysis, should we seek to please others even as Christ gave himself to bless us? To what end do the Scriptures operate to impart encouragement and a never-say-die attitude in the face of hardship? The answer to each of these questions is: ***the glory of God!***

Do you see that in vv. 6-7? He prays that God would enable the strong and the weak and everyone in the local church to live in harmony and unity together so that we together might “glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 6b). Again, in v. 7, don’t judge one another, don’t treat the weak as second-class citizens, don’t judge the strong for their exercise of liberty, but rather welcome and accept and embrace and honor one another. Why? ***“For the glory of God!”*** (v. 7b).

I hope you will join me in laboring in God’s grace to cultivate an atmosphere here at Bridgeway in which men and women, young and old, of all ethnicities, place a higher value on the glory of God than we do on academic achievement or athletic prowess or financial success or public fame.

So, how do we become the kind of people who “live” in “harmony with one another” and unite in our worship of the Lord Jesus? How do we experience the sort of transformation that we set aside selfish agendas and serve the interests of one another? In spite of all our differences on how we respond to secondary issues of eating and drinking and other such matters, how do we bear with each other and serve each other and in doing so cause people to see and marvel at the glory of God?

First, we look to Jesus and his example. We speak often about and meditate upon his sacrifice in giving himself for our sakes at unimaginable personal cost.

Second, we immerse our minds and hearts in the transforming power of the Scriptures. Of course, it isn’t the mere words on a page in a Bible that have the power to change us. It is the work of the Holy Spirit by means of those truths expressed in those words that change us. That is why it isn’t enough to be a people and church of the Word. We must be a people and a church of both Word and Spirit.

Third, we must set for ourselves a singular, common goal: the glory of God. But how, specifically, does our decision to accept one another and serve and please others rather than ourselves draw attention to God’s glory? Here’s the answer. When God is your all-consuming passion, when your heart and soul are ravished with his love and beauty and you are altogether satisfied with him and all that he is for you in Jesus, you don’t have to demand anything from anyone else. You lose interest in your own welfare and are strengthened to freely and happily please others.

When God is your treasure, your rest, your joy, you can let go of the demand that things be done your way. You can let go of the insistence that others serve and please you. So, when you are seen pleasing others and foregoing your own liberty for their sake, people can only conclude that something or someone

else is more important to you than your own promotion. “Wow,” they say, “what could possibly be so wonderful and beautiful and glorious and all-satisfying that Joe or Julie so freely gives up their own welfare for the sake of another. Oh, it must be God!” In this way, his glory and majesty are made evident.