

Romans 15:1-7 (Part 1)

Throughout this letter Paul addressed differences that had arisen between Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome. Romans 15 is an appeal to members of the Church to drop their differences and unite in the faith.

(Vs 1 NIV) 1Now we who are strong ought to bear the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.

One of the marks of a strong Christian is that we lift up those who have failed. Do you have a 'get away from me' attitude toward those who have failed? Or are you actively seeking ways in which you can come along side those who have failed? If you are strong then the bible assumes you will be helping the weak. If you are moving away from the weak, you might not be as strong in the faith as you think you are.

2Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.

3For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "THE REPROACHES OF THOSE WHO REPROACHED YOU FELL ON ME."

4For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, 6so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.

UNITY

This section is mostly about unity among the people of God. That is what we are going to focus on for the rest of our time.

UNITED BY A CAUSE

Unity describes the attitude of people who unite. When people unite something has drawn them together. There is something that is causing people to forget about their differences and work toward a common goal or purpose.

It is a normal part of our fallen human nature to have division and a lack of unity. It is fallen human nature to gossip about others. It is fallen human nature to divide into sides. In every place I have worked there are people who have a differences of opinion. And then for some reason people have this insatiable desire to figure out who they think is right and who is wrong. Even though most people very rarely know all the facts and subtle nuances. Pretty soon almost everyone in the place is for some people and against others. It is commonplace to second-guess politicians and the school board and just about everybody. Because of who we are as people, any time we organize as a group there is a high probability that there will be some degree of disunity. Disunity and division is the default position of fallen sinful people.

But generally speaking when people have a great cause or a great goal they will drop their differences at least for a season to unite and work toward the goal. But apart from something extraordinary there will always be some level of division among groups of sinful human people. But what about God's church?

REASONS FOR UNITY IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

There are very good reasons why the members of the church should experience unity more often than not. The things that draw members of God's family together are extraordinary. For example; through spiritual adoption we who are born again have become children of God. We have been filled with the same Spirit. We have been included in the same

promise. And together have been entrusted with the message that leads to eternal life. Together we have been called and equipped by God to fight evil and introduce people to the righteousness of The Lord Jesus Christ. If we keep our eyes focused on the great cause mission God has given us we will lay down differences, focus on the main issue and unite. *When eyes are on Christ unity follows. When eyes are on people, divisions abound.*

Unity is enabled when we please others, bearing their weaknesses.

Unity begins when we stop being selfish and ask how we can help those who are weak or who have failed. Bearing the “failings” of others is simply part of the ongoing debt of love we owe each other, which we saw in chapter 13. Part of loving one another biblically is carrying the “weaknesses” of the weak. Living to please yourself means that you will not go out of your way to help people or make friends with those who have failed or have some weakness. You will only love those who perform to your standards and preferences.

BEARING WEAKNESS DOES NOT MEAN TOLERATING SIN

Before we go any further, let’s clarify what Paul meant when he said we are to “*bear with the failings of the weak*”. He is NOT saying that we are to tolerate sin in our brothers and sisters. We saw in 12:9 that part of loving each other is to “*hate what is evil*”. When we see a brother or sister in sin, a biblical love for that person will lead us to gently and humbly correct them. We are not called to be “people pleasers” in the sense that we compromise the truth.

Where someone is violating a real, biblical moral absolute, we must love him or her enough to confront. That way they can get things in the open and restore fellowship. If we feel a need to confront someone the bible is very clear about how to do it.

Matthew 18:15-18 tells us that if someone has sinned against us we are to approach that person in private with no one else around. When we approach someone we call him or her aside in private and take the time to get his or her side of the story. Then we speak the truth with an attitude of love and respect. **Galatians 6:1-2** tells us that if we are called to confront sin we must do so with gentleness doing all we can to bring that person back to where they were before they messed up. Many times when sin is confronted we bark orders at someone and then walk away. This is not gentle restoration.

NOT EVERY ISSUE IS A SIN ISSUE

In my 15 years as a pastor I have only seen a handful of situations that actually required a church intervention.

Most often we have to deal with differences of opinion. And most often the biggest problems we have in the church are when people treat differences of opinion the same way they would treat major sin issues. What happens is that we focus on our differences of opinion so much that we take our eyes off of the vision and mission of the church. Problems and differences are in the front seat and the mission of the church is in the back seat.

Another problem I have seen is that we treat someone who sinned in the past just like they are in active sin right now. We do not let people get restored. If sin has been confessed and it is no longer happening, there is nothing to confront and nothing to punish. Let's look at more issues related to unity within the church.

NOT TO AVOID OR ISOLATE

God's call for unity in his church means that we are not to AVOID/ISOLATE people who have weaknesses. This is the standard pattern for the church. People with emotional weaknesses or people who

used to sin a lot but who are trying to follow the Lord today are often simply left alone.

We know better than to openly confront them about non-moral issues. We may even be strong enough to not gossip about them behind their backs. But in the church today, there is often nothing seen to be wrong with just isolating these people. We simply withhold love from those who do not see things our way or who are working through some sort of weakness or who sinned in the past.

We just leave them alone and sooner or later they just disappear. We don't even have to make a concrete decision to do that—it's something we do quite naturally. If someone seems a bit different to us, or if someone had a lot problems in the past we don't want to get close to them. They probably won't do anything for us except possibly drain away valuable time and energy.

Paul's words here scream into that context, *"It's not about what is pleasing to YOU!! It's about what is good for them. How are you loving them? What can you do to build them up?"* And avoiding someone is no way to build them up. We are called to BEAR, to carry their weaknesses, not to insulate ourselves from them. Someone may respond, *"But you don't understand—I've tried to reach out to people like that before and I got very tired."* Of course people with weaknesses will take our time and our energy. Of course people with failings will require more of us.

The weakness of the Jewish believers dictated what was on the menu for the Gentile believers at public meals. Loving people with weaknesses can be costly, but God has equipped us to BEAR those weaknesses. If people with weaknesses can't get built up in the church of Jesus Christ,

where else are they going to go? We are called to live NOT to please ourselves, but to please others.

APART FROM GOD, UNITY IS IMPOSSIBLE

Someone says, “*That’s hard.*” It’s not hard, that’s impossible. That’s why God gives us the Holy Spirit. That’s part of why Christ died on the cross, so that when God calls us to do the impossible things that go against everything in our self-centered, self-pleasing flesh, we can go to the cross, die to self, repent of our selfishness and be filled with His Spirit to love people who are in some ways different. This unity Paul calls us to is an entirely GOD-DEPENDENT, supernatural way of living. This is not the Kiwanis Club or Rotary Club or any other club where it may be perfectly acceptable to ridicule or judge or avoid people with weaknesses.

God doesn’t give us the luxury of being unified with only those people who are like us. He calls ALL of us to love each other—to bear one another’s weaknesses. Unity is enabled when we live to please OTHERS, bearing their weaknesses.

Another truth relating to unity from this text is

Unity is a gift of God.

We see this in verse five when Paul prays to God, “***May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus.***”

Unity is like every other good and perfect gift it comes from God. There are no formulas that will bring us to unity—God gives it. He puts it in our heart to ask. We ask. And He delivers the love for people we would not otherwise love.

Unity is not simply an absence of strife.

We can easily think that if a church is not biting and devouring one another, they are unified. That is not true. All that is necessary to live without strife is to be superficial with one another and to not care about what happens to the church and its people. Unity, as we have seen is in a body where the people live to please others, not themselves. The glue of unity is biblical, supernatural agape love. Unity is more than the absence of strife, it is the presence of agape love and that always requires a miracle in our hearts and only God works miracles.

Agape is a Greek word for the love that God puts in our hearts for one another when we are born again and walking under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus loves us so much that he died for us and adopted us as his own. Agape love is when the Holy Spirit takes the love that Jesus has toward us and he supernaturally puts that kind of love in our hearts for other people.

We must pray about the specific relationships in our life that he wants to put a finger on and get us to change and repent for not bearing weaknesses like we should.

And we must pray on a corporate level. We must ask God to bring our church to repentance in areas of disunity and loveless-ness.

Unity does not mean uniformity on all issues.

There is a myth that says that in order for people to have genuine unity, they have to agree on all the issues. That is a lie. The Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome had not been in agreement about the proper place of food laws. Some felt one way on the issue and some felt another way. As is almost always the case, one position was right and one was wrong. The Gentiles were doctrinally correct, but they were beating up the weaker brothers with their freedom. On issues of minor importance like this one and

so many that make up the life of the church—we are called to love each other enough to not be rattled by minor disagreements. If we wait for unity until we all agree on everything, we will wait until we are all dead.

TAKING IT HOME

1. Verse one said, “We who are strong ought to bear the failings of the weak”. Is there anyone you can think of that is weak in some way that you are trying to invite into your life in a real way so that you can help him or her carry the burdens of their life?
2. If you have had the occasion to confront someone about something they said or did, did you follow Matthew 18? Did you follow Galatians 6? Would your admonition be considered gentle and working toward restoration and healing? Or is what you do simply a good scolding?
3. Is there anyone in this church that you are simply ignoring or avoiding? If so, what are you willing to do to work toward the kind of face to face relationship unity that is called for in the bible? The kind of unity where people love one another enough to talk through their problems, drop the small stuff and forgive the big stuff?