

**ONE VOICE
Romans 15**

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We're coming to the conclusion of our sermon series from Paul's epistle to the church in the capital city. This Sunday and next Sunday will conclude our journey through Paul's most theologically rich epistle. Many of you will have completed the course, hearing every sermon in the series. You are now well acquainted with the rhetorical flow of Romans.

Last week, we noted some tension in the church at Rome. Everyone was judging his neighbor rather than focusing on his own faults and foibles. Most likely, the Gentile Christians were offending Jewish scruples. Certain Jews, unsure about whether the meat in the meat market had been through the pagan temples as a sacrifice, had become vegetarians. Other Jews and Gentiles declared that God was owner of every herd on every hill, and, therefore, it was neither here nor there concerning when, where, or how the meat was butchered. They ate meat with a clear conscience.

Likewise, certain Jews were observing the festivals and the holy days that crowded the Jewish calendar, while others treated every day the same.

Here, Paul admonishes them to quit making selfish choices but, rather, "pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another" (14:19). Therefore, quit judging your brother and build up the church.

Have you ever had the feeling that maybe, just perhaps, we Christians are susceptible to majoring over minor issues?

One of the oddest stories I've heard is about the Presbyterian [could have been Baptist] church splits in the little town of Centerville, Georgia, population of around 5,000 people.

It all started with one original Presbyterian church that had an internal conflict around 1911 over whether to take up the offering before or after the sermon. (I say just take it up twice and make everybody happy!) The splitting-off church became the "Centerville Reformed Presbyterian Church." Just four years later, another church split occurred over whether to have flowers in the sanctuary. The church that split off was renamed "Trinity Reformed Presbyterian Church of Centerville."

A total of seven more splits happened between 1915 and 1929 over various issues, and by 1931 the latest addition was named "Third Westminster Trinity Covenant Presbyterian

Reformed Church of Centerville.” More church splits occurred between 1931 and 1975 over the conservative/liberal bifurcation within that denomination.

Since 1975, a few more church splits over various issues has brought the total number of church splits in that one town for that one denomination to 48 – apparently a record. The last one was over whether or not it was a violation of the Sabbath Day to check your email on your personal computer. The church split over that “issue” –some folks left the Second Street First Ninth Westminster Covenant Reformed Presbyterian Church and renamed their new church “The Presbyterian Totally Reformed Covenantal Westminsterian Sabbatarian Regulative Credo-Communionist Amillennial Presuppositional Church of Centerville.”

I’m not making this up, folks – truth is often stranger than fiction. A teaching elder (Paul Davis) in the PTRCWSRCCAPCC was quoted as saying, “I think we’ve finally got it right now, we have a church with 100 replacement doctrinal purity. We’re up to 6 people on Sundays now. I know that numbers are not important, but we’re hoping to grow a little more.”

We can all get a good chuckle out of that story, but the sad fact is that it is a true story and it represents a lot of what many folks, especially non-believers, feel to be wrong with modern institutional denominationalism. (Stephen Rowland, “Splitting Hairs,” Columbiadailyherald.com)

Chapter 15, especially the early section, flows directly from chapter 14. Chapter delineation and versification of Paul’s epistles comes at a much later date. Paul didn’t write “Chapter 15, verse 1.” Chapters and verses were simply added as reference tools. Admittedly, sometimes the chapter breaks seem like a bad seam, for chapter 15 flows directly from chapter 14.

Let’s look at verses 1-4

“Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification. For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.’ For 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.”

I. Please your neighbor (v. 2)

The first thing I want you to see in chapter 15 is that we are called upon to put our neighbor before ourself. When Paul says “please your neighbor,” he is reminding us that love limits liberty. There are some things we could do that we shouldn’t do because it might, indeed, offend our brother.

Bearing the burdens of your brother is following the example of Christ (v. 3), for even the Messiah did not please Himself. When the strong do not please themselves by satisfying their own desires, they follow the example of Christ who did not please Himself, but bore our sicknesses and carried our pain on the cross (Matthew 8:17). The purpose behind pleasing our

neighbor is to act for his good to do whatever edifies him, rather than what might cause a fracture in his faith (1 Corinthians 10:33).

The long-term goal, however, is not to keep the weak happy at all costs, but, rather, to urge them along with their own growth and development. The weak, too, are not just to seek to please themselves but to allow grace for those who see things differently than they. It is the principle of egalitarian reciprocity: I should seek what's best for you in the development of your faith, and you should seek what is best for me in the development of my faith.

A beautiful passage is quoted in verse 3: Psalm 69:9. On the cross, Christ passively suffered His fate and bore the insults of the insolent in dying for those who were weak. God, however, made this one who was the object of widespread scorn the object of humanity's hope. The death of Christ brings forgiveness, which requires those who receive this forgiveness to freely forgive others. We who receive this reconciliation must also be busy reconciling. Rather than reproaching other believers with whom we disagree, we are to accept reproach. In fact, when we do so for the name of Christ, we are called "blessed," because "the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (1 Peter 4:14).

Paul reminds us (v. 4) that scripture, which for him was the Old Testament, provides encouragement that bolsters our endurance and nourishes our hope. What a beautiful phrase: the encouragement of the Scriptures that we might have hope. Isn't that what you want today, hope?

A student, asked to summarize all the gospel in a few words, responded: In the Bible, it gets dark, then it gets very, very dark; then Jesus shows up. (Will Willomon, *He Came Back*, www.preaching.com)

II. Glorify God with one voice (v. 6-13)

Look at verse 6

"[So] that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The word translated "one accord" can also be translated "together." It's used for the way God's people pray in Acts 1:14, the breaking of bread in Acts 2, and praising God, speaking boldly the word and sharing possessions in Acts 4. If the church is to be described by any one word, it is this word, "together" (*homothymadon*). You see, being in church – in community – is more than just being kind to each other. We are to magnify God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, through our unanimity based upon our shared commitment to Christ.

The church is like a choir that sings to God in harmony. In fact, glorifying God is what God intends for all creation to do. God's cosmic intention is to eradicate the human division of Jews and Gentiles, and Greeks and barbarians, and wise and foolish, and strong and weak – that all should praise Him with one voice. You see, Christ's death (v. 3) rolls out the welcome mat for all the ungodly, including you me and you.

Only a church bathed in peace can proclaim authentically the message of God's peace to a world that does not know the ways of peace. Those under sin (we've already been told in Romans 3:17), "the path of peace they have not known." Only as the church herself is at peace can she proclaim the Prince of Peace.

What follows next (vs. 9-12) is a harmony of Old Testament quotations which say God's people, from the very beginning, were intended to include both Jews and Gentiles. Oh, it's true (v. 8) that Christ first became a servant to the Jews, thus fulfilling the promises to the fathers. Remember all the way back to Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." God's promise to Abraham was that he would become the father of many nations (Romans 4:18). Such a promise requires that the Messiah belong to the line of Abraham for that promise to be fulfilled.

This series of citations follows to confirm that from the law of Moses, from the Prophets, and from the Psalms, the inclusion of all people, Gentiles, in God's family has always been part of God's plan. These passages come together with this "one voice" singing and glorifying God, praising Him, rejoicing that we are all recipients of God's mercy and we're all full of the assurance of hope.

The first citation comes from Psalm 18:49 – "Therefore I will give praise to You among the Gentiles, and I will sing to Your name."

The second citation (v. 10) comes from Deuteronomy 32:43 – "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people."

And the third citation (v. 11) comes from Psalm 117. It directs all the nations to sing praises to God. "Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise Him."

The fourth citation (v. 12) comes from Isaiah 11:1 and 10 – "There shall come the root of Jesse, and He who arises to rule over the Gentiles, in Him shall the Gentiles hope."

Yes, the Lord's Anointed did come from the root of Jesse. Maybe it's even an allusion to His resurrection: "He who arises to rule over the Gentiles." His universal Lordship as the victor over death.

And Christ's rule does not lead the Gentiles to be subordinate to Israel, but, rather, in sharing the hope of salvation with Israel. The crucified and resurrected root of Jesse is not only the Messiah of Israel, but also the Gentile's risen Lord in whom they have hope. In verse 13, we come back to hope. "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

There you have it. With one voice, all creation is to praise Him.

Today marks a one-year anniversary for the Covid crisis in the city of Amarillo, Texas. If there could ever be an event that would splinter a large group of people with various political,

theological, philosophical, and scientific views, it would certainly be the Covid crisis. Though we would not all agree about everything (in fact, you may not agree with what you yourself felt a week ago), we have made it through this mess with humility, grace, and thoughtfulness. I do not know of a church where people have continued to serve as you have served in every way imaginable, even creating new ways and new avenues when old avenues closed. Thank you, in these darkest of days, for being one voice of praise.

“In the Bible, it gets dark, then it gets very, very dark; then Jesus shows up.”

Hope enables believers to bear up under suffering. We have done that. Hope sees the good in others who might otherwise be disregarded as being hopeless. And as we experience the peace of God, we live peaceably with all and try to build up the church.

During this past year, we have walked with families through immeasurable suffering. Isolation. Fear. Confusion. We have stood beside families who mourned the loss of a dad, mom, husband, or wife. I have watched our Bible Study classes rise up and serve those among us who caught Covid, delivering meals and, most of all, delivering hope. Covid came to your house and my house and God’s house. But together, though it all, we have been the bearers of God’s hope. Even in the darkness, every Sunday we have been a united voice of praise.

III. Preach the gospel (vs. 14-22)

When he begins verse 14, Paul turns to the topic of his calling to preach the gospel to the Gentiles and how that will impact his future travel plans. Look at verses 20-21: “And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man’s foundation, but as it is written, ‘they who had no news of Him shall see, and they who have not heard shall understand’” (quoting Isaiah 52:15).

Paul has a sense of urgency. He doesn’t want to waste time duplicating what others have already done. He doesn’t want to create unnecessary rivalries by building upon another man’s foundation. Paul wants those who have not heard to have the hope of the gospel of Christ Jesus. Preach the gospel.

IV. Share material blessings (vs. 23-33)

The letter closes in verse 23-33 with Paul’s plan. He plans to go to Jerusalem, and then to Rome, and then to Spain. Look at verses 23-28. “But now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you whenever I go to Spain – for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while – but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. Yes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things. Therefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain.”

Paul wants to take the gospel to Spain, where the gospel has not yet gone. And on the way, he's going to pass through Rome. He has no intention of settling down in Rome and building upon another man's foundation. He hopes they will "send him on." That's the language of "you'll help me with co-workers, you'll help me with an offering, you'll help me with translators, you'll be part of this ministry to Spain." He needs rations, equipment, funds, and traveling companions. Spain didn't have a significant Jewish population at the time. Paul couldn't just go to the synagogues, as he did in the East. Paul needed a new approach to reaching those in Spain who had not heard of Christ.

But he will stay with them for a period. Sort of interesting little translation there. Look at the end of verse 24: "When I have enjoyed your company for a while." The Greek text is really translated this way, "If first, in some measure, I might have my fill of you." What's the old saying? "Both company and fish stink after three days."

Spain is a logical goal for the apostle to the Gentiles who felt indebted both to Greeks and barbarians. Since Spain remained stubbornly resistant to the Greco-Roman culture, Romans were considered to be barbarians.

And Paul has another surprise in verse 25. Before heading to Rome to be sent by them to Spain, he's first going to Jerusalem. Now you take out a map, any map. Paul is in Corinth. You do not go to Rome or Spain through Jerusalem. That's the wrong direction. We were recently looking at flights to Colorado Springs from Amarillo. You quickly learn that you must first go through Dallas. Wait a minute – that's the wrong direction! You might say Paul is going to Colorado Springs through Dallas – or more like to Dumas through Dallas.

Why is he going the opposite direction to Jerusalem? We learn in verse 26 that Paul is taking an offering from Macedonia and Achaia – we learn elsewhere also Galatia (1 Corinthians 16:1) and Asia (Acts 20) – to aid the Jewish Christians experiencing famine in Jerusalem. You remember the church council, that the pillar apostles – James, Peter, and John – asked Paul, even as he took the gospel to the Gentiles, to remember the poor (Galatians 2:10)? This he was eager to do. Paul is remembering the poor in Jerusalem. In verse 27, since the Gentiles shared in the spiritual wealth of Israel, the Gentiles should share their material wealth with their Jewish brothers in need.

You see, for Paul, everything depends on this offering. If Paul arrives at Jerusalem and the Jerusalem Christians accept the offering from the Gentiles, it is an indication that they have also accepted the Gentile church. It's not just about the money; it's about the meaning. To accept the offering from Philippi, Corinth, Galatia and Ephesus, to receive funds from fellow believers who are Gentiles, is to receive the Gentiles themselves. Everything for the future of the church of being one voice rides on this offering. Paul is nervous, as he should be, for we know from the Book of Acts that he is arrested on this trip, and he only makes it to Rome much later, bound by chains.

V. Pray with me (vs. 30-31)

There is a final thing he says, “Pray with me.” Look at verses 30-31: “Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints.” Paul is frightened.

There you have it: one voice of praise. Jews sharing spiritual riches with Gentiles, and Gentiles helping out fellow believers in a famine. The church, with all of its diversity, praising God in unity with one harmonizing voice – one glorious voice of praise.

Please your neighbor? Glorify God with one voice. Preach the gospel. Share material blessings. And pray, pray with one another.

In 2015, my wife Lisa was in the grocery store and noticed two little girls riding in a shopping cart – one up in the basket seat and the other below. Lisa was in the dairy section, perusing the various yogurts, when the little girl riding above in the basket posed the question, “What’s your name?”

Lisa replied and then, out of courtesy, inquired as to the little girl’s name.

The little girl not only offered her name, but also introduced her sister, as well. Then the little grocery store evangelist got down to the real issue at hand. “What’s your church?” she asked her new friend, Lisa. Lisa replied, “I go to First Baptist Church. Where do you go to church?”

The little girl stated the name of her church, but then asked Lisa to explain about a “first” Baptist church. The little girl then said, “Oh, First Baptist. Well, I just go to the church that has all the people that I love.”

And Lisa said, “Me, too.”

How about you?