

Bearing the Weaknesses of the Weak

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 15:1-6

Preached on: Sunday, January 27, 2013

Will you take your Bibles and turn to Paul's epistle to Romans? We come again to our verse by verse study of this amazing epistle to the early church that has such practical implications for each and every child of God even this day. Romans chapter 15. This morning I would like for us to focus on the first six verses. Let me read them to you.

Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. Let each of us 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 THEE FELL UPON ME." For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹

I trust that you have come to this place this morning with a passion to worship our God who reigns and to learn more of what it means to submit to his lordship. I think it is good for you to understand that the primary role of every preacher of the gospel is to restore the sheer awe of God in your heart, to put his grace and his glory on display so that we might fall down and worship him and magnify his name, that we might see the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

One great old preacher, Cotton Mather, over 300 years ago in New England said this, quote, "The great design and intention of the office of a Christian preacher is to restore the throne and dominion of God and the souls of men."

You see, my friends, the throne of our heart is typically occupied by things other than God, because our hearts are prone to be awestruck, by things other than God. Therefore, we erect idols in our heart and we worship.

Before we look at the text this morning I want to remind you of these facts, because there is a worship war going on right now in most every heart in this room. You see, every one of us are driven by self love, by self will to pursue things that we foolishly think will satisfy the cravings of our flesh, things that we find far more wonderful than God. Today God competes for your attention even right now. I know that as a pastor whenever I come

¹ Romans 15:1-6.

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before you I am competing with idols in your heart. I am competing with young girls who are more concerned about being seen on Facebook and being seen in the right clothes than they are being seen by God as one who trembles at his Word. I know that I am competing with young men who are more awestruck by video games and their cars and their trucks than knowing and loving the God who created them. I know that I am competing with the young single woman who is certain that the lasting joy she craves can be found in a certain young man she simply cannot live without. I know that I am competing with young mothers who love their children more than Christ. I know that I am competing with young fathers who are captivated by pornography more than the one who bore their sins in his body on the cross. I know that I am competing with older women who are more passionate about looking younger and feeling younger than they are enjoying a communion with a living and ever present Savior. And I know I am competing with older men who are more enthralled by their favorite athletic teams and their hobbies than knowing the living Christ and feeding on his transforming truths, the truths found in his Word. And therefore many of you will come to church this morning and you will feel the consequences of this kind of idolatry. You will be captivated, many times, by fear and discouragement. You will be driven to tears by bitterness and disappointment. Many of you will struggle with fears and boredom, loneliness, some full of envy and jealousy of other people. You will have no appetite for the Word of God. For most you have spent more time on Facebook this week and watching television than you have nourishing yourselves in the Word. Bottom line, you will no longer have an awe of God's mercy and his grace. You will no longer be captivated by steadfast love. You will no longer be lost in the sheer wonder of his sovereign rule over your life. You will no longer be thrilled by his presence and emboldened by his power. No, your smart phone is far more intriguing than God.

Beloved, whenever we lose our awe of God, whenever we find ourselves no longer lost in just the wonder of the gospel, our flesh will pursue false gods. And we will become enthralled with idols of our own making and of our own choosing. And Satan has a million of them to choose from. And my responsibility and privilege is to present to you the glory of God so that you might see him afresh and forsake your idols. For he alone is able to heal and forgive and transform and satisfy our souls. As we examine his Word we see his glory. And through his Word we find the Spirit of God evoking within us that sense of wonder and awe that causes all of the fleeting pleasures of this world to just pale in insignificance. So I would humbly ask you as a minister of the gospel to repent of those wicked things that you find so awesome, a word that is so terribly overused these days. Forsake those idols and listen with a heart that craves the majesty and the supremacy and the glory of our unfathomable God.

So allow me to put his glory on display this morning by looking at this passage of Scripture that we have before us, because the ultimate purpose of the Word is to produce

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worship. And here today God is going to speak through his Word regarding our behavior towards one another.

Now bear in mind that the most important commandment, the supreme commandment is for us to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength and the second to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves, which is a whole lot. Knowing that this is going to be difficult for us at times even in the body of the Church, the Lord has given us great instruction to teach us how to get along.

By way of review, in chapter 14 verse one he tells us that we are to accept the one who is weak in faith. You will recall from our study that the one who is weak in faith is one whose faith is not strong enough to enable him to fully perceive his liberty in Christ. His conscience is poorly informed in certain areas and therefore it holds him to non essentials and self imposed restrictions. Often things from his religious past, things that God neither commands nor condemns.

In the first century church you will recall that some Christians that had been converted from Judaism struggled with this. They were reluctant to abandon certain aspects of the Mosaic law under the old covenant, issues pertaining to certain foods and drink and the observance of the Jewish sabbath and things that went along with that. And some Gentile Christians have similar issues that they struggle with concerning drinking wine or eating food that was sacrificed to idols. And many of these folks refused to believe that these things really didn't matter to the Lord anymore, that under grace there was liberty. There was freedom. Those convinced otherwise Paul labeled the weak, weak in faith. And those who understood their freedom in Christ and were not encumbered with self imposed restrictions and rules whose conscience was accurately informed by the Word of God he called strong in chapter 15 and verse one.

Now, again, by way of reminder, here at Calvary Bible Church for the most part we don't quibble over those kinds of things, those disputable matters of eating, certainly eating meat sacrificed to idols. I don't think any of us have a struggle with that, because that doesn't happen in our society. But we do struggle with other things. We all bring our religious and cultural baggage with us in our Christian life. For example, I was thinking as I talked with a couple of other pastors recently that over the 18 years that I have spent here at Calvary Bible Church there has never been a single season of ministry that has gone by without someone complaining about the style of the music or the instruments or the kind of accompaniment or on and on it goes. And so what did we do? We learned that we should still respect those with whom we differ and we try to find common ground.

Another non essential that I am dealing with right now with three other churches in other parts of the country consulting with them has to do with the church being literally ripped

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apart by a new movement called family integrated church where they don't believe in children's church or Sunday school or youth ministries and for them it is taboo to separate families for age appropriate training and fellowship and they have studied some well meaning and I am sure godly men who I believe have tortured the Scripture to somehow advance their point of view and expecting everybody else to agree with them.

Believers fuss over all kinds of things. Sabbath day restrictions. We have dealt with that some here at our church, use of alcoholic beverages, tobacco, pumpkins, dressing up on Halloween, whether or not to celebrate Christmas or Easter. There are those who are opposed to birth control and those who aren't. Cremation versus burial. I mean it just goes on and on and on.

God knows the power of our flesh to fight over non essentials and get distracted from what is really important. So he gives us these things in his Word. And he really is answering the question here: How are the strong supposed to treat their weaker brothers and sisters that are hung up over things that really don't make a hill of beans difference to the Lord, things that many times cause us to criticize and condemn and fight and bicker and break fellowship?

Well in chapter 14 and verse one he says accept them. And basically as we have learned we are to accept them even as God has accepted them. We are all to bear with one another in love. And Paul is going to go on to exhort the weak, those that tend toward some of these things to stop being divisive in their condemnation towards the strong in verse three of chapter 14. And also he will tell us in chapter 14:

“Therefore let us not judge one another anymore.”²

Verses 19 and 20 he tells us that we are to:

“...pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food.”³

Beloved, I might add that the more we focus on just the wretchedness of our own heart, the more we see ourselves in daily need of Christ's presence and power in our life and his transforming grace, the less we will be inclined to point our fingers in condemnation towards our brothers and our sisters. How quickly we get distracted from what is really important and that is a gospel centered life with all of those implications.

So if I can put it this way, we do not need preference police and rule Nazis running

² Romans 14:13.

³ Romans 14:19-20.

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around in the church. Nor do we need freedom fighters flaunting their freedom and condemning those that don't agree with them and trying to violate their conscience which will ultimately drive people into a deeper form of Legalism.

So we now come to chapter 15 and what happens in chapter 15 is the apostle now expands upon what he said in chapter 14, but he speaks primarily to the strong. Verse one of chapter 15.

“Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves.”⁴

And he is going to go on to use Christ as our example. So this morning I would like to present to you four ways that the strong are exhorted to deal with their weaker brother. Number one, we are to respect the weak; number two, we are to restrict our liberties; number three, we are to resemble Christ; and, finally, we are to rejoice in unity. And I have found this to be most instructive as I have preached it to myself this past week I particular because, frankly, I struggle in all four categories. And so do you.

So this idea of, first of all, of respecting the weak. Notice verse one.

“Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength.”⁵

The term ought carries the idea in the original language of obligation, of owing a debt. And grammatically if you look at it, it in essence says, “Under obligation are we.” And this phrase is placed forward in the sentence for emphasis. So this is a serious responsibility for us. In any enterprise the strong have an obligation to help those who are without strength, to help those in need whether they realize it or not. Most weaker brothers resent being called weak. I know I have in the past. And even in the present. We always want to see ourselves as more mature than what we are. And certainly it is human nature to insist that my way is right, your way is wrong. My conviction is spiritual, yours is carnal. So I don't need any help. Leave me alone. That is typically the attitude.

I have seen this kind of pigheadedness in my life on more than one occasion. I have even seen it at least once in Nancy's life. And if I am honest, I think I have seen it a few times in your life. I witness it often in my precious grandchildren who frequently tell me, “No, papa, I can do it. No, papa, you are doing it wrong. Let me show you how.” And then when it becomes obvious they need my help lest they destroy themselves or whatever they are dealing with, I must lovingly intervene. Folks, this is the same type of thing we

⁴ Romans 15:1.

⁵ Ibid.

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have to do in the spiritual. We are to bear the weaknesses, he says, of those without strength. It is interesting. The apostle has previously shown us what to avoid. Now he exhorts us with respect to what we must do and what we are to do is to bear the weaknesses of those without strength. Bear literally means to lift up, to come underneath and help carry a burden. And in this context we are going not see it carries the idea of respecting those who have sincere views that we may not agree with and help carry them even in their Legalism. And he is going to show us how.

Now often the strong perceive the weak as a nuisance, as an unwanted threat to the whole church that must be eliminated at all costs. And to be sure, the constant bickering over non essentials in the early church and even in every church was a great impediment to the gospel and to the spiritual growth of the strong.

I have often thought, fine. What could be accomplished at Calvary Bible Church if we had just a fraction of the zeal over some of these things unleashed on the enterprise of the gospel. Nevertheless, even though there are those that may try to shackle the entire church to their self imposed rules and convictions over non essentials, we are to respect them to help bear these issues with them. And even as there was a rule in ancient caravans for the strong to help carry the loads of the weak that they might be carried along and not left behind, we are to do the same thing with our more legalistic brethren and do so with a spirit of loving forbearance. They are not a nuisance. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ. And I am glad that some of you have been forbearing with me. And I hope you will continue to be so, because I am not sanctified. Neither are you. So we all struggle with these things.

For example, the ancient Jewish believer in Rome who was freed in his conscience from ceremonial obligations, those who were strong, had an obligation not to just merely tolerate those who remained under some of these self imposed ceremonial compulsions, but they were to help lift them up as they staggered under a burden that they didn't even necessarily knew they had.

And what does this look like practically? Well, as we are going to see, it is the idea of respecting them in love not considering them a nuisance, not being critical or condescending, certainly never being a stumbling block, as we have studied, causing them to violate their conscience, but come alongside of them, supporting and exhorting them to maturity.

Now this is important. It does not mean that we should all capitulate to their convictions and force the entire Church to adopt their position. This would be divisive within a body. I have seen this happen before. Nor does it mean that we not confront them if they become divisive, but we respect them. We support them in love and practical consideration and we even avoid exercising some of our own liberties that might

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unnecessarily wound their conscience. And even in church policy we try to find middle ground, to be conciliatory and sensitive, not combative and demanding. So we are to respect the weak.

Secondly, we are to restrict our liberties. Again, notice verse one.

Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.⁶

So here he exhorts us to self sacrifice, to forfeit certain legitimate liberties that might hurt our brother as we saw in verse 15 of chapter 14. For example, the early church, if you were a Gentile, strong in the faith and you went out to eat with one who was weak who just could not bring himself to eat meat sacrificed to an idol, you wouldn't eat that. You certainly wouldn't serve that to him. You would respect that even though it really doesn't matter to the Lord. Or if you were a Jew or if you were with a Jew, I should say, that simply could not bring himself to eat meat that still contained any blood or any animal that had been killed by strangulation or animals that were considered unclean by pork, you know, you're not going to have him over and serve a pork chop, you know? You are going to respect that and even restrict your own liberties.

Now we must understand that in the body of Christ there is a wide variation in spiritual knowledge and maturity among believers. So it is crucial that we learn how to study our brothers and sisters which we have relationship that we might discern those areas of perhaps weak faith, of Legalism and show respect to them to demonstrate self denying love in the constant exercise of humility when we are around them.

I have from time to time opportunity to be around Jewish believers who have come to Christ as well as Jews that have not. And one of the things that they will do is they will wear a yarmulke or a {?} which is a skull cap. They believe that the crown of the head is the crown spot which represents the area of the body that connects us directly to God. And the yarmulke for them covers the spot in respect to God. It even symbolizes man's capacity to be directly connected to God. And so many Jews will wear it when they pray or when they study the Torah. And some will wear it all the time as a sign of submission to God.

Now that is not commanded in Scripture. And it is not condemned. And when I am around them I don't have to wear that. By the way, it is those of you that will come with me to Israel this October we will go down to the wailing wall and they will have the yarmulkes that you will put on. And my liberty in Christ says, "I am not going wear

⁶ Romans 15:1-2.

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that.” But my love for other people will say, “I am going to wear that. That is fine.” That is what the Lord would have us do.

Isn't it interesting in our culture it is just the opposite? It is an insult to God for many people to pray with a hat on. For them it is just the opposite. Now that is the type of thing that you run into. So whatever the taboo or self imposed religious restriction, we should be sensitive to it. We should respect it. We should restrict our own liberties.

By the way, this was Paul's heart in dealing with all men. 1 Corinthians nine verse 19 he says:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some.⁷

It is important for me to digress here for a moment. This text is often used in support of a principle called contextualization, that somehow the church in order to be effective needs to become like the world in order to win it. There are many so called churches with services that cater to the lusts of the lost. They try to remove every offense of the cross and make those who are at enmity at God feel right at home. Those who are under his wrath, who are dead in their sins would feel like this is where they need to be. Certainly, we want the lost to feel comfortable and loved. But the last thing I want them to do is to feel like somehow we are just like them and they are ok before a righteous God.

I visited these places and for the most part they are nothing more than a religious rock concert which has nothing to do with worshiping God in spirit and truth. In fact, I believe many of these churches are nothing more than a venue of garage bands. You take away the music and the whole church falls apart.

But many will argue, “Well, wait a minute. We have come together to reach the unchurched.” I have heard that so many times and I think, reach the unchurched, reach them with what? Entertainment? With some watered down gospel that basically says, hey, you know what? Being a Christian is cool. You can continue to love the things of the world just like us. You can add Jesus to your life and just keep on partying.” Jesus said, “If anyone wants to come after me he has got to deny himself and follow me, pick up his

⁷ 1 Corinthians 9:19-22.

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cross daily.”

Beloved, the gospel is the gospel of self denial, not self fulfillment. You want to reach the unchurched and do what Christ modeled and what he commanded. Go into all the world and preach the gospel teaching them to observe all the things that the Lord has commanded. See, the gathering of the saints on Sunday morning is for the purpose of transcendent worship and edification, not accommodating those who hate the God that we love. Evangelism is merely a byproduct of what should happen in a Sunday morning service. To claim that this text is a mandate of pragmatism in ministry is to betray not only a profound ignorance of hermeneutics, which is the science and art of biblical interpretation, but it also betrays a staggering misunderstanding of the nature of the Church and the holiness of God. Paul was not a man pleaser. He said in Galatians 1:10:

“For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.”⁸

Beloved, I would submit to you that had Paul been preaching a seeker sensitive, contextualization he would have never been stoned. He would have never been left for dead. He would have never been scourged, beaten and imprisoned and finally killed for the sake of the gospel. What we must understand in 1 Corinthians nine and other passages what we see is Paul is making the point that Christian liberty must be circumscribed or restricted by love. That is the whole theme of 1 Corinthians chapters eight through 10 when he addresses the very issues that he is dealing with again now here in Romans 14 and 15 regarding strong and weak brothers.

So Paul saw his liberty in Christ as something to be used for the glory of God, not his own enjoyment. So he was willing to set those things aside if in so doing it would raise the probability that he could share the gospel to the lost and edify those that knew Christ.

So, again, notice verse two. He says:

“Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.”⁹

The term please in the original has the idea of establishing a positive relationship between two factors and therefore to make peace. It carries the idea of reconciliation. And for what purpose? Well, for his edification, a term which properly means in the original the erection or the building of a building. But it is often used metaphorically in the New Testament to describe the building up of another believer. In other words, helping another believer’s spiritual advancement.

⁸ Galatians 1:10.

⁹ Romans 15:2.

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Beloved, the edification of the weaker brother is what is really important here. It is well worth restricting our personal liberties. We don't want our brethren to be needlessly shackled to strange religious taboos or rules or practices that God neither condemns nor commands. It is very distracting to the body and really separates them from the whole concept of grace. This text refutes the notion, also, that the church must somehow rush to conform to the convictions of the weak so as not to offend. To do that would allow the weak to control the church and permanently shackle every member to their level of immaturity and that could have a devastating impact on the church. It could suck the life right out of a body of believers. Instead he says we are to please our neighbor for his good to his edification. We should be conciliatory for the purpose of building them up. That is the idea.

You remember verse 19 of chapter 14.

“So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.”¹⁰

And, my friends, you don't do this with a my way or the highway kind of attitude. No, you respect the weak. You restrict your own liberties that you might not offend, that you might gain an audience in their life that you might help them grow, that you might develop together the same mind. I would remind you of Ephesians four beginning in verse 12. And here God speaks of how he has given to the church teaching shepherds, pastor teachers. Why? He says:

“...for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man.”¹¹

Unity of the faith here is not some kind of subjective unity. It is not some kind of ecumenism where we all just are people of faith that all hold hands regardless of what we believe and sing kumbya. This is speaking of an objective unity, a doctrinal unity. Paul speaks of this in Philippians two verse two that we are to be like minded. We are to be of one accord, of one mind. Philippians 3:16, walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind. So, beloved, this must be the attitude of our heart.

So the strong are to respect the weak, restrict their liberties. And, thirdly, we are to resemble Christ. He is our supreme example. Notice in verse three:

¹⁰ Romans 14:19.

¹¹ Ephesians 4:12-13.

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“For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, ‘THE REPROACHES OF THOSE WHO REPROACHED THEE FELL UPON ME.’”¹²

As always, the Holy Spirit uses the perfect passage to illustrate his point, a passage from the Old Testament. He is quoting David here in Psalm 69 verse nine who was a type, a picture of Christ.

If we had time we would go back to Psalm 69 and verse nine and we would learn more of that whole psalm, but let me just give you briefly what that text says. David says:

“For zeal for Thy house has consumed me, And the reproaches of those who reproach Thee have fallen on me.”¹³

You see, David had a passion for the holiness and glory of God and he was determined to please him come what may and he faced enormous persecution and even in the face of ignominy or humility he followed the Lord. He had become the punch line of the jokes of fools and in so doing he was absorbing the arrows of hatred intended for the Lord himself. And likewise Christ, the great mediator between God and man became the substitute for God as well as man in that on the cross he bore the reproaches aimed at God as well as the sins committed by man.

So think about it. If Christ did not please himself, whom did he please? He came to please the Father and we are to be like that in how we function in our life.

Do you remember in John 4:34? Jesus told the 12:

"My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work." ¹⁴

Is that your heart? He told the vast crowd in Capernaum in John 6:38:

“For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.”¹⁵

And we see this so beautifully, so vividly pictured in Paul’s description of Jesus while he was here on earth in Philippians two beginning in verse five. There he tells us:

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God

¹² Romans 15:3.

¹³ Psalm 69:9.

¹⁴ John 4:34.

¹⁵ John 6:38.

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a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.¹⁶

Beloved, this is the kind of selflessness that should characterize each one of us, a humility that is so powerful that we are willing to set aside our own liberties even if it means being mocked and ridiculed and we are to follow Christ and proclaim Christ regardless of the consequences. And certainly today we find ourselves increasingly under attack by those in our culture. Bible believing Christians are now the butt of jokes and the favored subject of comedians. And, I might add parenthetically, though, all of this is going to grow worse as God prepares the world for the antichrist and the pre kingdom judgments that will occur just before he returns.

But, beloved, we need to look often on the face of our Savior on the cross, to be reminded of God's hatred for sin and God's grace towards us who will believe. And when this is the habit of your contemplation, you will gladly humble yourself to please Christ as well as your brother come what may. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

Now how did Jesus do the will of his Father in the midst of such suffering, temptation? The answer can be found in many passages, but certainly in Jesus' response to the first temptation that Satan presented to the famished Son of God where he said, "Command these stones become bread." Jesus answered in Matthew four and verse four:

"It is written, 'MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD.'"¹⁷

You see, ultimately the Word of God is far more important than even our physical food, because it is the Word that nourishes us and sustains us spiritually in times of adversity and its benefits are not merely temporal, but eternal.

We see the power of the Word of God in Paul's next statement in verse four of chapter 15. Let me pause here. For helps us look back to the messianic allusion in the type of David just quoted from Psalm 69 in the Old Testament. He says:

"For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."¹⁸

¹⁶ Philippians 2:5-8.

¹⁷ Matthew 4:4.

¹⁸ Romans 15:4.

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Now here he is referring to the Scriptures which would have been the Old Testament. You see, the Scriptures in the Old Testament were not only written for those of that day, but for our instruction as well. I think grammatically we could interpret this whole passage by saying that God had his purpose. He had it when he first caused the writing, when he first inspired it. He thought of us and our needs long centuries ago and stored up for us in a permanent form all of the Scripture instruction so that it would never be lost.

You will recall Paul spoke of the events of the Exodus under Moses even in 1 Corinthians 10. Remember in verse six and 11 he says:

“Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.”¹⁹

Beloved, never underestimate the power of the Old Testament. {?} had this today, quote, “The differences of today are bearable. I am sorry. The difficulties of today are bearable because God in his Word tells us of a better time yet to come. He mediates his comfort and encouragement by speaking through his Word to the hearts of receptive believers, to separate one’s self from Scripture is to turn a deaf ear to the voice of the heavenly father anxious to console.

Think of the profound instruction of the Old Testament and he perseverance and the encouragement that it imparts. And why were they written. He says, “That we might have hope.” Actually in the original language that we might have the hope.

It is interesting here. The verb is in the present tense denoting our continuous possession of this hope that comes through the Word of God and the article, the in front of hope, speaks not just of a general hope, but of a specific hope, the hope of the redeemed, the blessed hope that comforts and sustains and lights the path of every believer even in the darkest valley.

So this underscores the profoundly instructive nature even of the Old Testament, not to mention all of Scripture which is inspired by God. You must remember that Scripture is, indeed, the voice of God, the revelation of God. And, as we see here in this text, it produces endurance and encouragement. God alone, Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 1:3, is the father of mercies and God of all comfort who comforts us in all our afflictions. And certainly I can testify to that truth as many of you can.

I want to point out the term perseverance. It means to stand fast. It means to wait, to endure, to bear patiently. In fact, it closely resembles the idea of patience, enduring all

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 10:11.

Bearing the Weaknesses of the Weak

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 15:1-6

Preached on: Sunday, January 27, 2013

that the Lord sends our way as we serve him in faith and obedience. James tells us this in chapter five beginning in verse seven.

Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not complain, brethren, against one another, that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door.²⁰

Of course, following Christ while enduring persecution is hard even as it is hard to persevere in selfless love towards other believers who are sometimes hard to love. Now how do we do it? What is God telling us here? We are to rely on the instruction of Scripture. And even though he is speaking more specifically to the Old Testament, certainly it would include, ultimately, all of Scripture. But as I think of the way the Old Testament has impacted me over the years regarding how to deal with people, I have found much instruction as I study the lives of Moses and Joseph and Daniel and David and so forth. Through Scripture he gives us not only the power to persevere, but also the joy, notice, of encouragement. This carries the idea of comfort as well as the idea of admonition. And why? That we might have the hope. Beloved, if you feel hopeless it is because you don't know the Word of God and you are not submitting to it.

In Psalm 130 we find a great message of hope. Sometimes it is called the Psalm of hope. In verse five we read:

“I wait for the LORD, my soul does wait, And in His word do I hope.”²¹

And he says in verse seven:

“O Israel, hope in the LORD; For with the LORD there is lovingkindness, And with Him is abundant redemption.”²²

On the afternoon of May, 1738 John Wesley had listened to and had been moved by the singing of Psalm 130 as the vespers in Saint Paul's cathedral, or I should say at the vespers in Saint Paul's cathedral in London, which, by the way, is a magnificent building. You could fit our entire church just in its dome. That very evening he attended a reading of Martin Luther's preface to Romans in a meeting house at Aldersgate. Unable to continue his resistance against divine revelation, Wesley believed the gospel of Jesus Christ and was wonderfully converted.

²⁰ James 5:7-9.

²¹ Psalm 130:5.

²² Psalm 130:7.

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My friends. That is the power of the Word. Apart from the hope revealed by God through his Word, we have no hope. For his reason we should share the heart and habit of the psalmist who declared in Psalm 62 and verse five:

“My soul, wait in silence for God only, For my hope is from Him.”²³

And then in Psalm 119 verse 116:

“Sustain me according to Thy word, that I may live; And do not let me be ashamed of my hope.”²⁴

So what is Paul saying here? It is simply this. The only way that we can resemble Christ in humility and self sacrificing love as we interact with our brothers and sisters in Christ is to submit to his Word and practice it and when we do, we will not only edify our weaker brother, but we will also find perseverance and encouragement and enjoy the specific hope known only to those who are hidden in Christ, that glorious mystery that Paul talked about Colossians 1:27 which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

So, finally, not only are we to respect the weak, restrict our liberties and resemble Christ, but we are to rejoice in unity. This is such a magnificent benediction to close with this morning. And I might add that Paul often interrupts his arguments to burst forth in powerful and prayerful praise. This passage brings such encouragement to my heart. He says in verse five:

Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.²⁵

You know, I never cease to be amazed at this reality, that God always empowers us to do what he commands us to do. Isn't that a wonderful thought? He knows that we can't do it alone. And we know that we can't do it alone. And here we are reminded that the same God that gives us perseverance from his Word and his Spirit and empowers us with such joyful encouragement is the same one who also empowers us to be of the same mind with one another. God is not asking us here, ok, folks, I want you to try hard. Now pull yourself up by your bootstraps and get with the program. That is not what he is saying here. He is promising that he is going to come along side us in this great enterprise of love as we choose to be obedient in the realm of unity among the strong and the weak so

²³ Psalm 62:5.

²⁴ Psalm 119:116.

²⁵ Romans 15:5-6.

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that together we can do what? With one accord and with one mind and with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Beloved, we cannot do this, we cannot rejoice in unity if we fight among ourselves over non essentials. So I would challenge you this morning to ask yourself: Do I have personal convictions that really are not essentials, that God neither commands nor condemns? And if I am really honest I like to force these things on other people and make them feel guilty if they don't see it my way and condemn them. If that is the case, you need to really guard yourself against those. It can be so divisive. And, likewise, maybe you are not encumbered by self imposed restrictions over non essentials, but you have a tendency to look down on your weaker brother to see them as a nuisance or worse. Here we learn what we are to do. Learn by God's grace and his power to respect the weak and to restrict your liberties to resemble Christ and to rejoice in the unity that he gives us by his grace and by his power.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you for these eternal truths. I pray that the seeds of learning that you give us from your Word will bear much fruit that we might enjoy unity among the brethren as we have so much here at our church. Lord, we praise you for that, but, Lord, we want even more. Certainly want more of you. May we not be lost in this world captured by all of the things that are distracting, but, Lord, may we be awestruck by you that we might serve you and enjoy you forever? I pray in Jesus' precious name and for his sake. Amen.

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