

Ryan Graetz

Romans / Unity / Romans 15:1–13

Series Number: 27

Readings:

Psalm 69

Matthew 20:20-28

Romans 15:1-13

Note: Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® NIV®
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Introduction

Introduction Proper

Christians have quite the reputation, don't we? How many of you have watched a movie or TV show where one of the characters is a Christian, and the Christian is made out to be judgmental or hypocritical? I can think of 3 major shows off the top of my head.

Why is that?

Well, of course, not everyone who *calls* themselves a Christian has genuine faith in God, or has been truly transformed by God's grace. If you don't truly understand his grace, you're not going to be gracious. You'll adopt *some* Christian values, but use them to beat everyone else over the head!

But that's not the only reason we get a bad rep.

Sometimes people who *have* truly been transformed by grace still judge and despise others, and so we Christians have this reputation for good reason! It creates hostility and disunity in the church. Sometimes we divide over really significant issues that you just *have* to take a stand on - issues where, if you compromised on them, what you have left is not really Christianity, but another belief entirely.

But sometimes the issues are secondary, debatable things. Should we dress up in suits and robes? Should we eat meat? Should we baptise babies or wait til they're adults?

And there are so many of these debatable, secondary issues!

So as a church, how do we live in unity? We're a community, and the word community actually has the word "unity" in it - can we be a model of unity in a society that's increasingly divided?

Well our passage today shows us that in fact we *can*. We *can* live in unity together! And the secret is to serve one another like Christ has served us. The secret to living in unity is serving like Christ.

Review/Context

Today we're looking at [Romans 15:1-13](#), and this is really part of a larger section that starts from the beginning of chapter 14. Romans is a letter the apostle Paul wrote 2000 years ago to the church in Rome, but what he wrote then through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is just as relevant to us today.

Back in the early church, there were tensions between Jews and Gentiles, or non-Jews.

The religion of the God Yahweh was historically a *Jewish* religion. But since Jesus came, his followers were seeing Gentiles converted from *every* kind of nationality and culture. And the question was, do these Gentiles need to keep all the Jewish laws and traditions or not? Should they be circumcised, should they keep the sabbath, should they keep all the kosher food laws, should they celebrate the Jewish festivals?

Well God showed them that Gentiles *didn't* have to do all those things. It was enough for them to believe and live according to the teaching of Jesus and follow God's moral law.

But that didn't mean it was easy to get along, right? And so Paul wants this church of Jews and Gentiles to be *united*.

Now in chapter 14 of this letter he calls some believers *weak* in faith. These are people, probably mostly Jews, who haven't quite understood that when Christ came, he fulfilled the law, and now they were free from its commands! They think they should still obey all the Jewish traditions and laws.

And Paul says some believers are *strong* in faith. These people are mostly Gentiles who believe they have freedom. They believe they can eat anything, they don't have to keep the Sabbath, and so on (Moo 2018, 843-849).

And like Mike preached a couple of weeks ago, Paul urges the weak believers not to *judge* those who live out their freedom. And he tells the strong believers not to *have contempt for* those weak believers who still struggle with issues of conscience. In today's passage, Paul helps them *deepen* their unity.

The key to this passage is to see that each time Christ is mentioned, he's *serving* others in some way. So Paul wants to show us that the secret to true unity is serving like Christ.

Bear each other's weaknesses

State the Point

So we're going to tackle the first half first. We serve like Christ when we bear each other's weaknesses.

Show from the Bible/Explain

In vv1-2, it says, "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak". But this sounds like the strong just have to tolerate the weak, right? The CSB translation is closer to what Paul wrote in Greek: "Now we who are strong have an obligation to bear the weaknesses of those without strength...".

Paul is saying that if we believe we have freedom in Christ in one of these "disputable" matters, we shouldn't use that strength purely for our own benefit. Rather, we focus on please our neighbours. In fact, we are *obligated* to carry the weaknesses of the weak!

Why? Look at v3: Because that's what king Jesus did for us!

And Paul quotes [Psalm 69](#) here, which was written by Jesus' ancestor, the famous king David. Its a vivid cry for help when David's enemies were surrounding him, taunting and insulting him. But he was being attacked for his faith, so he was enduring insults that were really meant for God.

And hundreds of years later Christ, the heir to David's throne, was insulted and attacked for *his* faith in God. Why? Because he was saving *us*. He endured the shame of crucifixion for *our* sake. He wasn't pleasing himself, he was loving his neighbour - us!

So Paul calls us to follow in Jesus' footsteps.

Illustrate

YouTube has been showing me shorts from a professional powerlifter, Anatoly. Anatoly does this thing where he goes into gyms and dresses up as a janitor. And he'll walk up to some absolutely ripped guys in the gym and pretend to have no idea what he's doing. And he'll try to join them in their workout.

He'll load up the weights ridiculously high, and of course these massive guys try to talk him out of it - "you'll hurt your back", "that's too heavy for you". But then he'll just start powerlifting it real easy. Or he'll go up to the weights they're maxing out on and just lift

them above his head with one hand. And these guys are standing there open-mouthed, you know, their jaws and egos hitting the floor at approximately the same time.

That's *not* what Paul is talking about here, that's *not* how the strong should use their strength - to shame others. Rather, he's aiming for something more like

a parent using their strength to carry their child's bag for them on the walk to school, knowing they'll have to carry it for the rest of the day after that.

Apply

But what does this look like in practice in our church?

Well, some of us think we should wear our Sunday best, and the service leader and presider should wear robes. Others don't think that's important. So we run a traditional gathering at 8:30, and a less formal one at 10:30 so that we're not trying to force each other into a particular way of doing things.

If a Muslim family comes to Christ here at St Georges, wouldn't that be awesome? If they did, perhaps we should consider not serving pork at our community lunches? Or if someone feels its a sin to eat meat because of how animals are treated, we could always prepare vegetarian options for them, right?

But what I want you to notice is what Paul *doesn't* say. Paul never tells us to *change* the weaker brother or sister, does he? He commands us to bear their weaknesses, not to force them to live like we do. God is able to change them if he wants.

But maybe he cares less about making us all the same, and more that we display the love of Christ by bearing each others' weaknesses!

Now, let's go back to [Psalm 69](#) for a second. How can Paul take a part of Scripture written hundreds of years before Jesus came and apply it in a command to *us*?

Well he tells us in v4: "...everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope."

What is this endurance and encouragement? Where is the hope? Well towards the end of [Psalm 69](#), David speaks about how God will save his people in the end.

See the Scriptures promise us a future where we will rise from the dead like Christ did, and we will live here with God in peace and safety for hundreds, thousands, millions of years. Whatever freedoms we give up now, its only temporary. We'll enjoy them forever later.

Christ gave up his freedom so that we could get there. So what's *most* important now is that we help our weaker brothers and sisters get there. Will we flaunt our freedoms and make them stumble? Will we risk their eternal destiny for our temporary pleasure?

It is the servant-hearted attitude of Christ that produces true unity. So we serve like Christ by bearing each other's weaknesses.

Accept each other's differences

State the Point

We also serve like Christ when we accept each other's differences. We serve like Christ when we accept each other's differences.

Show from the Bible/Expain

In verse 7, Paul instructs the Roman church to "Accept one another". Welcome one another.

And this term means more than a polite greeting at the door. The Greek word Paul uses has strong connotations of the ancient value of hospitality. Back then people had fairly strong boundaries on who were "insiders" vs who were "outsiders". You would eat with insiders, show them hospitality, care for them as if you're family. But you didn't have much to do with people who you classed as "outsiders".

So Paul tells us to treat one another as "insiders", with hospitality, to accept each other and eat with one another. Treat each other like family.

Now its pretty clear that Paul directs the first half of our passage, vv1-6, towards the strong. But he also directs the second half, vv1-7, mainly towards "weak" believers.

How do we know that? Well, in verses 8-13, Paul talks about Jews and Gentiles accepting each other, but then pulls out no less than four Old Testament quotes, and they're all about welcoming *Gentiles* into God's people.

So, Paul is mostly talking here to *Jews* about welcoming *Gentile* believers as insiders. And this makes sense, right. God had given all the sabbath laws, food laws, circumcision laws and so on to the *Jews*. But now, many Gentiles were believing in Jesus, and when they didn't keep the sabbath or eat kosher, it would have been hard to accept them as insiders. It would have been easier to call them "sabbath-breakers", "pork-eaters", or names like that. So he's telling the weak to welcome in the strong. "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you..."

And then he goes on to show that this wasn't a simple thing for Christ to do! Christ became a servant to the Jews. During his life on earth, Jesus said he "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Christ served them by *dying* for them!

But then Paul shows that Christ accepts the Gentiles, too! In vv9-12 he quotes four Old Testament passages to show that Jewish prophets predicted this long ago. Centuries beforehand, they prophesied that the Gentiles would come to worship Yahweh.

- In v9, Paul quotes [Psalm 18:49](#), and here its like Jesus, the Christ himself, is singing God's praises among the Gentiles (Seifrid [2007] 2011; Wagner 1997).
- In v10-11, its like Jesus is then encouraging the *Gentiles* to sing God's praises with the Jews!
- Then in v12, Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah. The "Root of Jesse" refers to the future king God had promised Israel, the Christ himself. But looking back, we know that's talking about Jesus! So Jesus will rule over all the nations, including Gentiles. Gentiles will even put their hope in him.

And this is exactly what happened in the early church! The Gentiles were hoping in Jesus in large numbers.

And Paul says, "despite them not keeping all your rules and traditions - *accept* them. Why? Because Christ accepted you. He served you. He died for you. But he also died for them. So *you* should accept them too.

Illustrate

As a child, I was part of a church that was very strict. We thought you have to wear a suit to church. You shouldn't work on Sundays. You should only listen to certain kinds of music. Its always wrong to drink alcohol or smoke. You shouldn't own a TV.

And we wouldn't let anyone serve in that church unless they held to those views. We would judge people and treat them as immature Christians if they didn't act the same way.

And you know what? It really damaged people. It turned minor issues into major ones. It drove many people away and caused division in the church.

And Paul is saying here, "no, that's not how it should be. If you have strict views on these debatable matters, you can hold to that. But don't exclude people and judge them and treat them as outsiders. Rather, accept them in as insiders."

Apply

And so here at St Georges, when we have stricter views than others on “disputable matters” - and I’m talking about ambiguous and secondary issues - its easy to fall into judging others who don’t.

But remember, Paul calls *them* stronger in faith! *God* has accepted them. So we accept them in too.

Do you see how this attitude creates unity? Again, we’re not trying to change others - the love of Christ motivates us to *serve* them instead, and so we overcome those issues that would otherwise divide us!

Strive for God’s glory

State the Point

Thirdly, this morning, we serve like Christ by striving for God’s glory. We serve like Christ by striving for God’s glory.

Show from the Bible/Explain

See, ultimately, God’s glory is our ultimate goal. Look at v5-6: Paul prays for the Roman church to be united in their thinking in the same way as Christ. Why? So that “with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”.

We can’t be praise God together if we’re divided, can we? We’re too distracted with the conflict! Our mouths will be singing hymns while our mind is busy thinking winning the next argument! And if we’re divided, it doesn’t matter how much we praise God with our mouths - our actions will defame him!

No, Paul wants the Roman church to be unified so that they can praise and worship God together. And when they do, people will actually *believe* the praises they’re singing!

In v8, Paul says Christ “has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, so that the promises made to the patriachs might be confirmed”. In other words, the coming of Christ fulfils the promises made to Israel’s founding fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That glorifies God because it shows his *faithfulness*.

But in v9, Christ’s service also shows God’s *mercy*. Gentiles used to be outsiders, excluded from the people of God, lost in rebellion and sin. But Christ’s life, death, and resurrection serves them too! They are included into the community of God’s people on no other basis but God’s kindness. So through Christ’s service to the Gentiles, God is shown to be *merciful* (Wagner 1997).

So if *we're* to serve like Christ, then we should strive for the glorify of God like he did! And God is glorified when together, we strive for unity.

But there's also a good side benefit. If we're all striving to glorify God, we'll all be focused on the same goal!

Illustrate

Like if you're in the supermarket, you and all the other customers are spread out all over the shop, right? What happens, though, if one of the workers calls out on the intercom, "free icecream in the frozen aisle for the next 10 minutes"? Very quickly, you're all going to end up much closer together, right, because you've got the same goal! Icecream!

Apply

Its the same in the church. If we all passionately seek the goal of God's glory rather than trying to make everyone else just like us, we'll actually end up united. If we focus on our preferences and our freedoms, we'll get only division and conflict. But if we strive for God's glory, we'll pursue unity because we know *that's* what glorifies him, not division and conflict!

Conclusion

If we can't achieve unity in the church, we have no hope of achieving it in society. But v13 says we serve the "God of hope", and this passage gives us all the resources we need to live in unity.

Sometimes we think unity, true community, will only happen once we iron out all our differences. Once everyone else agrees with our theology, dresses the way we like, or acts we way we think they should. But it doesn't happen by making everyone else agree with us.

But Paul shows here that true unity comes from something different entirely - its about how Christ served us!

He bore the shame, the insults, and the sins of the world on his shoulders. He died a horrible, painful death. He did it to bear *our* weaknesses and bring us to God. [Isaiah 53](#) says

Isaiah 53:4-5 NIV

⁴ Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering...he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

This amazing grace transforms us to want to serve like Christ!

And we do that when we bear each others' weaknesses, rather than trying to change each other.

We serve like Christ when we accept each others differences.

And we serve like Christ when we strive together to glorify God.

So this morning, Bear one another's weaknesses as Christ bore yours, and "accept one another...just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God."

Confession

We are all guilty of putting our preferences and desires above the glory of God. We are born in selfishness, and we find it easy to judge or despise others, don't we? We are guilty before God, as David writes in [Psalm 69:5](#). And so let's confess our sins to him and repent, let's run to him for forgiveness and ask him to transform our hearts by grace. Let's take a minute to do that individually, then we'll confess together.

Assurance

And we know Paul calls God the God of hope! When we confess our sins and trust in God for our forgiveness, he loves to forgive us and he gives us an amazing hope for the future. If you want to know more about that, and if you want to overflow with joy, peace, and hope as this passage says, please come speak to Mike or myself after the service and we'd be happy to share more with you.

› 830: Take My Life and Let it Be

› In Christ Alone

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