

Romans 15:1-13
“Welcome One Another”
Imago Dei Church (Raleigh)

INTRODUCTION

Big Idea: Christians are called to live out the gospel in selfless love and unified worship.

Or more simple, Christian unity.

So let me give you **4 encouragements for Christian unity** from this passage.

1) BUILD UP THE WEAK.

[15:1-3]

1 We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. 2 Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. 3 For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.”

Paul reveals in verse 1 that he considers himself one of the strong-conscienced believers—even though he is Jewish.

Remember that most of the “strong” were the Gentile believers—and they had **strong consciences** because they would not have been as likely to feel bound by OT ritual laws.

The “weak” had **weak consciences**—they tended to think that faithfulness and godliness meant they had to still observe food/drink laws, and laws about holy days.

Or, as Pastor Tony mentioned last week, they failed to consistently apply the doctrine of justification by faith alone—even though they believed it! They still tended to feel the need work out their salvation thru commands they had actually been released from.

So Paul says, *“People like me—those with strong consciences—our strength carries with it a responsibility to those with weak consciences.”*

(ILL) Like Uncle Ben telling Spider Man that with great power comes great responsibility.

What is that responsibility? It’s two-fold.

1) “bear with” — Paul says the strong must bear with the “failings of the weak”—referring to their weaknesses → their weak consciences.

Remember, those with weak consciences tended to look at OT laws and think that we as NT Christians ought to still observe those laws.

So what does it mean to “bear with” this weakness?

This is not a call to join, nor to endorse. He's not saying, since they think it's right to do something, just go ahead and do it to make things easy.

Rather, it's a call to forebear. It's a call for patience, for love, to absorb.

I love this verb (bear with), because it shows that it's not easy, and that it will be costly.

(ILL) You don't bear with your favorite sports team when they're competing for the championship every year. You enjoy that. It's easy (just ask and Alabama fan). But when your favorite team is last in the division, or just mediocre enough to get your hopes up year-after-year, only to crush them by midseason—that requires forbearance (just ask an Ole Miss fan...or NC State).

But for many of us, there is no sense in which our way of dealing with those we disagree with can be called "bearing with." Maybe we tolerate them. Maybe we simply ignore them. Perhaps we gossip about them. Perhaps we do the most deceptive thing of all—we correct them (after all, that's the loving thing to do, right?).

None of these, I don't think, is what's in mind here. Rather, bearing will take the form of working for their good.

2) **“Please”** — 1b (**“not to please ourselves”**) & 2a (**“let each of us please his neighbor”**) show us that our responsibility to a weaker brother or sister is to submit my own pleasure/interest/position to those of my brother or sister.

‘pleasing your neighbor’ isn’t trying to make them laugh, or providing him with some good food.

Thankfully, Paul explains what he means: it means working **“for his good, to build him up.”**

There is a direct parallel with Phil 2:4 here, where Paul exhorts the Philippian Christians to not seek after their own interests, **“but also the interests of others.”**

Now, sometimes Christians hear exhortations like this and think that they are being told to sacrifice their opinions, their interests, their positions and simply adopt those of the “other side.”

But I don’t think that’s what Paul is saying here. I think he’s saying that on the other side of the scale from “my interests” or “my pleasure” is **love** for our brother or sister — and that love should FAR outweigh my insistence on my own interests, positions, etc.

So “bearing with” or “pleasing” your brother in his weakness does not mean placating her, or simply

telling her that she's right when you think she isn't.

Rather, it's holding onto your conviction that she is wrong and caring more about loving her than fixing her.

(APP) There are many issues in the Christian life that are really important, but they are not the gospel. And those who are more mature, more knowledgeable, "stronger"—must realize that it is more important to welcome others in their weakness than to fix people of their weakness.

I am called to bear with, and work for their good. Not correct them or fix them.

But someone may object, *"loving them is going to involve helping them to see that they are wrong"—or, "it's ultimately unloving to let someone live according to a false belief or an incomplete application of the gospel."*

Perhaps. But love will always mean more than that. Love may include truth-telling, but it cannot be reduced to it. Neighbor-love will not only include WHAT I say, but also HOW I say it, WHEN I say it, WHETHER I'm the right person so say it, and HUMILY to consider that my brother may actually have a point on the other side...among others. If I

“love” my brother by giving him what I perceive to be the truth but hate him in every other facet, I am the noisy gong and the clanging cymbal of 1 Cor. 13:1. And I cannot pretend to be working for his good and his edification.

A better way is to look at Jesus. That’s what Paul tells us to do in verse 3.

[3] For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.”

This is a quotation from Psalm 69. The interesting thing about this quote is, the “you” in it is not referring to sinners, but to God. The psalmist so trusts in God, so relies on him, and is so concerned with his pleasure that the psalmist comes to identify with God himself.

By applying this text to Jesus, Paul shows Christ to be the perfect servant of God, with ultimate concern not for his own pleasure or desires (Matt. 26:39: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me...”), but for God’s (“...nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”)

In Christ, we have the example and the extent of this ‘bearing with’ and this ‘pleasing.’ It is selfless, it is for the other’s good, it absorbs others’ wrongs and weaknesses...but more than any of that, it is primarily directed at God himself. Our work for the pleasure and building up of our brother is a manifestation of our work to please God above all things.

Christ's passion for God's delight leads him to the cross, where he would bear the sins of the world. Our own passion to please the Lord above all things will likewise lead us to a place where we imitate Christ, bearing the weaknesses of our brothers for their good.

2) RECEIVE THE OUTSIDER.

[15:7-12]

7 Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. 8 For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, 9 and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name." 10 And again it is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." 11 And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him." 12 And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope."

The second encouragement for Christian unity is to receive the outsider (15:7-12)

The back half of this passage is Paul's explanation on one simple phrase in verse 7: "welcome one another"

I love the ordinariness of this command. Everyone can apply the sermon today!

And in many ways, the perfect application of this text is to find someone who is different from you and simply welcome them into your life, into your home, into the church.

But Paul quickly shows that this is no matter of just dusting off the welcome mat. Rather, it's a supernatural task rooted in the story of salvation itself.

“Welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you.”

As soon as we ask, how has Christ welcomed you, we are driven to the heart of the gospel itself. We are reminded that even if we are the “stronger” brother or sister on matters of conscience, on matters of salvation, we are the weaker brother that has been welcomed.

In the gospel we were not told, *“clean yourself up; get your theology right; get your gospel-implications right; get your ethics straight; have all the right opinions—and then I will welcome you.”*

Rather, Christ tells us, *“you are a mess and you cannot clean yourself up; you are a rebel who cannot undo your treason; you are a leper that cannot clean your spots—but I will bear your punishment and I will take your disease so you can be acceptable to the God who created you. And even though you will be accepted, you will still bear the scars of your rebellion and your sickness. You will still be messy. You will still make mistakes. You will still fail and hurt. But don't worry, you will be accepted anyway. Welcome.”*

And when we realize that THAT is how we have been welcomed, it transforms the way we relate to those we must welcome now.

But there's more:

We've been welcomed individually and personally, yes, but Paul has something broader in mind. Look at his explanation starting in 8-9: “[8] For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, [9] and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.”

Paul engages in some full-Bible biblical theology here. Still talking primarily to the Gentile believers, he reminds them that Jesus came as a *Jewish* Messiah.

This accomplishes 2 things: (a) it fulfills the promises of God to the Jews; and (b) it shows the mercy of God in accepting the Gentiles

He reminds them, “You’ve been welcomed into promises that weren’t for you. Christ came to the Jews...and yet you have been welcomed in by his mercy.

But even this was to show God’s truthfulness (v.8), since from the beginning God’s design was to redeem people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation.

That's why he quotes these 4 OT passages: all relate in some way to Gentiles being welcomed into God's plan of salvation as an act of God's mercy (Ps 18:49; Deut 32:43; Ps 117:1; Isa 11:10)

What does this mean for us?

1. The gospel is the center of Christian unity. We are united because of the common bond we share in Christ ("in essentials, unity").
2. The gospel demands Christian unity. Welcoming one another is not an option for the hospitable few. It's a litmus test for whether we understand that there is only one Savior, and there is only one people of God.
3. Jesus shows us how to care for those who are outsiders. This is not a stretch of Paul's argument—it's precisely Paul's argument. YOU WERE OUTSIDERS, and you were welcomed in the most extravagant possible way. What possible reason for the exclusion of your brother could you possibly give? Jesus gives us the pattern.
4. Really practical. We should bend over backwards to welcome those who we have nothing in common with other than the gospel of Jesus Christ. (Age, gender, race, social status, economic means—yes, but also political opinions, policy positions.)

Just as those with strong consciences have a particular responsibility to bear with those with weak consciences, so also those in positions of social strength bear a particular responsibility in welcoming those who are marginalized as outsiders.

Commonality in the gospel

Centrality of love

To what end?

3) WORSHIP HARMONIOUSLY.

[15:5-6]

5 May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

A unified church is able to glorify God in a particular and special way.

Note, though, that this harmony is ultimately a give of God, who provides the endurance and encouragement necessary to live like this.

(APP) Are you discouraged? Tired? Do not give up, friend. But look to God who gives the grace we need to glorify him together.

Not a passive glorification, but an active worship.

As we worship, we cultivate hope.

4) HOPE EXPECTANTLY.**[15:4, 13]**

4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. . . . 13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

Twice in this passage, Paul wishes that we would have hope.

It seems like such a strange inclusion to me.

But as I thought about it more, it makes perfect sense that Christians are being called to do something supernatural.

It's going to be hard ("bear with").

It's going to be uncomfortable.

It's going to be a long road.

So it makes sense that throughout this text the Apostle Paul would direct our attention to the future, where the unity we long for, work for, pray for, and even begin to taste, will ultimately be realized.

CONCLUSION

Who is the weak among you? – bear with him

Who is the different among you? – welcome him