

Romans 15:1-13 (DHT)

We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the weaknesses of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please our neighbor for his good, for his edification. For even Christ did not please himself, but as it has been written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you have fallen on me.” For whatever was written in the past was all written for our instruction, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Now, may the God of endurance and encouragement give you the same mind with one another, according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore receive one another also as Christ has received you, to the glory of God.

For I tell you that Christ became a servant of the circumcision for the truth of God, in order to confirm the promises given to the fathers, and in order for the Gentiles to glorify God for his mercy.

As it has been written, “Because of this I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.” And again it says, “Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people.” And again, “All the Gentiles praise the Lord, and all the peoples praise him.” And again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse will come, the one arising to rule over Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.” And may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you will abound in hope.

Romans 15 in Context

You would be hard-pressed to find a commentator who failed to identify unity as among the critical themes of the *entire* letter to the Romans. In Ch.1-3, all humanity is united in our state of total depravity. I do not need to meet you to know with absolute certainty that you are a sinner deserving of nothing short of the eternal fires of Hell. All humanity is united in our sinful state. We like to think of unity as a purely positive attribute. But these first three chapters make clear all humanity, Jew and Gentile, are united in our total depravity. In Ch.4, all humanity is united in our need for a messiah. In Ch.5, all humanity is united in a single path to salvation. In Ch.6-8, all who follow that one path are united in their status as new creations and co-victors with Christ. In Ch.9-11, all who are saved are united in their status as members of the Family of God, regardless of their ethnicity. In Ch.12-13, all who are saved, while having distinct gifts, are

united in one body serving in love. In Ch.14-15, all who are saved are united in their task to love one another and sacrifice the pursuit of their own pleasures. And in Ch.16, all who are saved are united in the warning against individuals who willfully divide the body of Christ over doctrines of first importance. *Unity* is among the most important themes Paul stresses throughout this letter to the Romans; but not unity on every nit-picky thing—specifically, unity on the Gospel.

Our passage continues Paul’s train of thought from the previous chapter. He writes that the seal of unity is to love one another, but what does that mean?¹ The word for love Paul uses in this section of chapters is *Agape*, an others-focused love typically expressed through sacrificial giving, with the goal of edification. In the state of our depravity, our instinct is to put ourselves before others. The world tells us that putting others before ourselves is a weakness in us, a life wasted. The Bible says otherwise. To put others ahead of ourselves is to be like Christ; to put others ahead of ourselves is a life well spent, a life saying *your kingdom come*, my kingdom leave; *your will be done*, my will be done away with. This is the will of God.

United in Sacrificing our Pleasure

Sacrificial love is precisely the call Paul extends to all Christians. *We who are strong*—we, meaning not just people who go through the religious motions and rituals but instead those who are aware of their freedom in Christ. *We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak*—the weak, not meaning people who forgot to pray before taking a bite at dinner, but instead those who are not fully living into their freedom in Christ. Now, if we are honest, there are likely parts of our lives we are among the strong and other parts we are among the weak. *We who are strong have an obligation to bear the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves*. So let’s consider one of the two ethnic disputes from the previous chapter.

Paul makes it clear that eating meat is clean; that being a vegetarian for purely theological reasons is not fully living into your freedom in Christ. Paul describes those who hold a vegetarian-theology as those who are “weak” in faith. Yet, Paul also instructs those who do eat meat, because they recognize their freedom in Christ, not to flaunt meat before their vegetarian-theology friends. Instead, the sacrificial obligation we have is to join them in not eating meat while we are with them, to not prompt them to violate their conscience. In doing so, we set aside that which pleases ourselves in order to encourage and build up our neighbor, friend, or whoever

¹ See my message, “What Love Is: It’s the Gospel” from 1 John 5 for a walkthrough of the various words for love.

it may be in your own life. Paul says as much in Rom. 14:15: *For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in agape-love.* We are to set aside what pleases us for the sake of a weaker fellow believer.

The world tells us our own desires are good and ought to be pursued—follow your heart, they say—but all throughout the New Testament, we read that setting aside our own desires, our own pleasures, our own wills, for the sake of others fulfills the will of God. Putting others ahead of yourself exemplifies *Agape* love, and is in and of itself a Christ-like act of sacrificial giving; in fact, in our passage this morning, it is not just a Christ-like act, but a Christ-like obligation. And the next verse tells us precisely why this is an obligation: *For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “the reproaches of those who reproached [the LORD] fell on me.”* This quotes from Psalm 69, one of the most quoted chapters of the OT in the NT. In this Psalm, David prophetically prays that the accusations of the world would fall upon his messianic descendant. In this Psalm, this messianic David, who took upon himself the false accusations of the world against YHWH, cries out for his own vindication and for salvation for all who humbly seek YHWH. And he makes such requests based on God’s *Hesed*—God’s covenant faithfulness.

Jesus ascribed to himself the identity of this messianic David from Psalm 69. In John 15, Jesus says although he did no wrong, the world’s hatred of him was to fulfill these same words. Jesus claimed to be the Messiah. When you read Psalm 69, you will see how the messianic David was to be humiliated *before* he could be vindicated. Christ had to suffer before he could be glorified. This is the example of Christ that Paul is speaking of in our passage. Christ set aside his own comfort and gave himself sacrificially for others. We who belong to God in Christ are united in our call to follow Christ’s sacrificial example, setting aside our own desires and freedom for the sake of edifying and encouraging others.

The Scriptures of the Former Days

Paul interrupts his argument on unity to make a brief, but important point about the Scriptures. When Paul speaks here in verse 4 of the Scriptures of the former days, he in no way is talking about the New Testament. The Hebrew Scriptures were preserved through the ages, scrolls distinct from one another. During the days of Ezra-Nehemiah, following the freedom from Babylonian exile when the Jews dispersed over all the earth, there was a great need to have an organized set of Scriptures all Jews everywhere could access. This is known as *Tanak*.

Tanak is the collection of the Hebrew Scriptures contained in our Bibles today as the OT. The order of books in *Tanak* is slightly different from our Bibles, but all the same books are there. The TNK in *Tanak* stand for the first letter of the three major sections of the Hebrew Scriptures. The first is *Torah*. These are the books of Moses, such as Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The second section is the *Nevi'im*. These are the books of the prophets. And in this section are two main sub-sections: the former prophets, such as Samuel and Elisha, and the latter prophets, such as Isaiah and Obadiah. The third section is the *Kethuvim*. These are the books of the writings, such as Psalms and Chronicles.

What Scriptures of the former days are Paul talking about? He’s talking about the totality of the Hebrew Scriptures, for in the second half of our passage, Paul quotes from four passages to prove his main point, and he cites a passage from each of those three sections of the Hebrew Scriptures—and both sub-sections of the prophets! He quotes Deuteronomy from *Torah*. He quotes Samuel from the former *Nevi'im*. He quotes Isaiah from the latter *Nevi'im*. And he quotes Psalms from the *Kethuvim*. The totality of the Hebrew Scriptures is for our instruction, encouragement, and hope.

When you read the Scriptures, what are you reading? Are you reading at all or is Sunday morning your only regular time in the Word? If you are reading, are you only reading the NT? You must read the Hebrew Scriptures with the same reverence, the same urgency, and the same commitment as you read the New Testament, so you may grow in your understanding of Jesus as the Messiah, so you may be more fully encouraged, and so your inner soul would overflow with the hope those readings produce. The whole Bible is relevant for your life today.

The Confirmed Promises to the Patriarchs of Messianic Salvation to all Nations

Paul moves back to his previous argument on unity. *We who are strong have an obligation...not to please ourselves [but to] please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself but took upon himself the false accusations of the world against YHWH... For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the [Jews] to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.*

Christ did not please himself but instead became a servant. Christ’s mission as a servant was to show God’s truthfulness, and it did this in two ways: first by confirming the promises

given to the ancient Jewish fathers, most notably Abraham; and second by giving mercy to Gentiles in such a way that prompts praise and glory to God. Paul’s evidence for this claim comes through four quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures

2 Sam. 22:50 – *I praise you among the Gentiles, and sing your name.* In 2 Samuel 22, we read a song of David from the day the Lord delivered him from the hands of Saul. David is not just speaking of himself though, for in the last line he establishes he is talking about a messianic David. In this song, David prophetically describes the future messiah as one who is saved from and has victory over his enemies—and not just his enemies, but also victory over death by the LORD’s deliverance. This deliverance and victory flow from God’s *Hesed*—God’s covenant faithfulness. The deliverance of this messiah would bring salvation to the nations who submit themselves to him and obey him. *I praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.*

Deut. 32:43 – *Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.* In one of his final songs in Deuteronomy 32, Moses prophesies that the LORD will vindicate his people and be their strength. The LORD alone gives life to those from all nations who humbly submit to him. In the larger context of Deuteronomy, God promises to do this by sending another prophet like Moses, but even greater than Moses, who will perfectly obey and mediate between God and his people. God promises to send such a man because of his *Hesed*—because of his covenant faithfulness. *Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.*

Ps. 117:1 – *Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him.* Psalm 117 is the shortest psalm at a whopping two verses. Yet, in this short Psalm, we read that all nations lift up praises to God because of God’s *Hesed*—God’s covenant faithfulness that endures forever. *Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him.*

Isaiah 11:10 – *The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.* This fourth and final quotation comes from Isaiah 11, where we are told there will come forth a new David; a messianic David who will be perfectly righteous and perfectly just; a messiah who would bring forth such radical peace that even children will play over the dens of poisonous vipers without risk or fear. This messiah will stand as a signal for all nations and give peace to all who come to him for refuge. This messianic David will gather the elect of Israel from all corners of the earth and make a highway of deliverance for the Gentiles. Isaiah later describes in more detail this messianic David as a king whose throne is established

by God’s *Hesed*—by God’s covenant faithfulness. *The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.*

What do these four passages have in common?

These four passages are united by several common elements—there is a promise of a Messianic king from the line of David who plays a central role in bringing salvation to all nations according to God’s plan, a plan rooted in God’s covenant faithfulness. This is what Paul is telling us in Romans 15. He quotes from these four passages as evidence for his argument that Christ’s sacrificial giving of his own life and his victory over death confirmed the promises given to the patriarchs like Abraham. Among other things, God promised Abraham he would become the father of a multitude of nations, who together would be one people. From the beginning, God’s plan for salvation included Gentiles alongside the Jews. All throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God reminds the Jewish nation (and us) that his covenant faithfulness will not and cannot be broken. Christ confirmed God’s faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham by making a way for Jew and Gentile to be united into one people.

Is it any wonder Paul spent so much of this letter building an argument for unity? We are united in our sin. We are united in our lack of ability to cover our own sin. We are united in our need for the promised Messiah. We are united in our access to God through this Messiah. We are united in the opportunity for complete forgiveness of sins by the one who had the ability to cover it. We are united in one hope that God will remain faithful to his covenant promises made in the Gospel. And we are united in one faith and one baptism to one Lord Jesus Christ.

Gospel Presentation

This man Jesus, the son of God, the messianic king, lived a life of perfect obedience to God, as prophesied by Moses. This man Jesus suffered tremendously for the sake of others, as prophesied by Isaiah. This man Jesus died an innocent death, as prophesied by David. And on the third day, this man Jesus was delivered by the Father in victory over death, as prophesied by Moses, David, and Isaiah. Before you even knew it, when you were still dead in your sins, this man Jesus suffered for you, died for you, and was resurrected for you, so you would enter, Jew and Gentile alike, absent all notions of ethnic superiority, into one Gospel-unified family of God.

I extend this invitation to you to join the family. Consider, think about, meditate on the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. Do you believe that Jesus died, was buried, was raised, and ascended to heaven for you? Do you submit your life entirely to Jesus as your Lord? If the answer to these two questions is yes, then you are saved! If the answer to those two questions is yes, then you are a member of the unified, ethnic-inclusive family of God! You are completely forgiven of all your sins, past, present, and future. You are given a new heart, or in other words you are given a new worldview. You are given the Holy Spirit who lives within you and empowers you right now to turn away from sin and turn toward the LORD. And, if you are part of this unified people of God, then you are given the promise that, like Christ, you too will be physically raised from the dead to be with him in the age to come for all eternity. To this final promise, we still hope. Yet, our hope is with great confidence. Because of God’s track record of covenant faithfulness in the past, we have confidence God will remain faithful to his covenant promises in the age to come.

And so, *may the God of this hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing the good news that Christ died and was raised for you, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, and with confidence in the LORD’s covenant faithfulness, you would endure to the end, be encouraged along the way, and abound in hope.*

Let’s pray.