

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part 58

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WHAT SPIRITUAL STRENGTH IS *FOR* - WELCOME ONE ANOTHER AS CHRIST HAS WELCOMED YOU

Romans 15:1-7 - "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." [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. [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. [7] Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

In the middle of the tightly reasoned logic of Paul's argument in chapter fourteen there is a wonderfully melodic theme verse that captures our hearts with its truth - **Romans 14:17 - "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."**

Paul addresses particularly the subjects of ***eating*** and ***drinking*** because these were the ritual elements of conscience from previous religious commitments some of the newer converts found hard to leave behind. And these were some of the same issues causing friction between those newer, ***weaker*** Christians and those more mature, ***stronger*** Christians who saw Christ Jesus, God the Son, as the fulfillment of the law and the sole object of trust for salvation and peace with God.

But, argues Paul, the kingdom of God isn't based in those rituals. The Holy Spirit is the agent of the kingdom of God in our lives and He brings in ***righteousness, peace,*** and ***joy*** to replace a slavish, fearful, works-based standing before God. And because ***righteousness, peace,*** and ***joy*** are presented as the manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit, one could easily assume these fruits will just grow ***inevitably*** and ***supernaturally*** in the church where the Spirit dwells.

But there's more to it than that. Genuine unity in Christ can't be ushered in merely by singing songs of love and peace. And it can't be staged merely by removing denominational labels from church names. And, to take it even further, this kind of unity in the body of Christ can't just be **prayed** into existence (though prayer is absolutely crucial) or **worshiped** into existence (though worship is vital as well). This is the case Paul will make in chapter fifteen:

1) **THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT IN A CHURCH CONGREGATION CAN ONLY BE NOURISHED AND SUSTAINED WHEN SPIRITUAL STRENGTH IS EXERCISED IN THE RIGHT WAY**

Romans 15:1 - "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves."

Once again, for the sake of his argument, Paul divides up the Christians at Rome into the same two groups - **strong** and **weak** - this time placing himself among the **strong** - **"We who are strong...."**

But this time Paul has a particular point in mind. And the brunt of his instruction is aimed directly at the **strong**. Spiritual strength, like physical strength, is to be **used**. The strong aren't in the body of Christ so they can, like those with chiseled physical bodies, just admire themselves in the mirror under the floodlights. Spiritual strength is strength **for** something. And Paul tells us what that something is: **"We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves."**

Note the tone of **command**. The strong (Paul says nothing of the weak right at this point) have an **obligation**. There is something they must **do** if they perceive their own inward spiritual strength. And what they must do is stated first **positively** - **"...bear with the failings of the weak,"** and then **negatively** - **"...and not please ourselves."**

These are striking words. We spend a great deal of time in the church talking about how people **become** strong Christians. Paul is writing about what we must do when we **are** strong Christians. We sometimes neglect this aspect because **using** spiritual strength can be as exhausting as using physical strength. It takes a great deal of effort. Being a **strong** Christian isn't primarily about what you may **know**. It **includes** that, but is so much more. Being a strong Christian is primarily about what you **do** with your spiritual strength.

Paul has already given examples of how apparently strong Christians can use their strength **incorrectly**. Ironically, they can use their spiritual strength to **abuse** those who are weak and vulnerable. In fact, chapter fourteen begins with just such an example - **Romans 14:1 - "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions."**

Paul cautions against a certain **display** of spiritual strength - a **strong** Christian stance - that is all show. The strong has a firm understanding of his freedom in Christ Jesus. And he's **right**. The problem isn't that he's **mistaken**. The problem is he is **right**, but hasn't yet learned how to walk in his **"rightness."** He mistakenly thinks his role as one of the **strong** is to prove the error of those who are **weak**.

So Paul has to actually remind the strong to, indeed, **"welcome the one who is weak, (14:1)** but not to **"quarrel"** - not to **force change into his mind** or **win an argument**, or **make a point**. The strong mustn't use strength to make a **major** issue over a **minor** matter.

There may, indeed, come a time when correcting a brother or sister is a Christian **imperative**. People can drift into sin and specific disobedience to the revealed will of God. In those situations love **demand**s we correct and warn one another. But **not** over minor

disputable matters. **“Welcome** the one who is weak,” says Paul, “but not to **quarrel**”(14:1).

“Well then, what’s the point in being **strong**? What’s the point in actually being **right**?”

And Paul’s answer to that legitimate question is pure, spiritual genius. Because you are one of the strong, you **know** that you have freedom in these disputable matters. You **know** we’re not talking about issues of true Biblical holiness when we’re considering the issues of one’s past religious upbringing and the forming of conscience around issues not dealt with in the Scriptures. And because you **are** strong in Christ Jesus you **know** you stand by faith through grace. You walk in a freedom formed by a **strong understanding** of the finished work of Christ Jesus.

And here’s the point. That strong knowledge of your freedom in Christ means you already **know** these issues are no big deal. And that means it should be **easier** for you to give up your rightful involvement in these things than it would be for your weaker brother, who thinks they are a very **big** deal indeed. Your freedom gives you an advantage and a responsibility your weaker brother doesn’t have. He’s not ready to forfeit **his** views on these issues. But you **should** be ready to forfeit **yours**.

This sets the stage for Paul’s next admonition to the strong:

2) **PLEASING MY NEIGHBOR IN CHRIST IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN PROVING I’M RIGHT**

Romans 15:1-2 - “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.”

Truly strong people, as opposed to merely **inflated** people, don’t have to **flex**. They don’t

pose with their spiritual strength. They sense their obligation to **“bear with the failings of the weak....”** (15:1). That means they **carry** the confusion and the fear and the spiritual near-sightedness of the weak **graciously**. They know how to **lovingly yield** to the weaknesses of the weak in non-essential matters.

The strong never add to the **guilt** of the weak. They labor to make the burden of the weak feel **lighter** and more **agreeable**, never to make the burden feel **greater** or **more condemning to conscience**. The strong don't give the weak anything to get needlessly **upset about**. The strong **cater** to the weak. Paul sums it up with beautiful simplicity when he says the strong never **“please themselves”** (15:1).

I'm pleasing myself when I focus on my own need to win the argument. I please myself when I focus on my need to prove my point. I please myself when I demolish ch unimportant but cherished convictions of my weaker brother. In disputable matters, I am never out to make my weaker brother's convictions look small or dated. In fact, Paul says the one sure sign of genuine spiritual strength is the capacity to cater to the weaknesses of my brother rather than my own ego. I will make myself look small in order that my weaker brother may find nurture and confidence.

The picture Paul finally settles on is the image of constructing a building - **Romans 15:2** - **“Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.”** Many translations use the word, **“to edify,”** or **“for his edification.”** The picture is one of a **construction process**. Even today we may speak of a structure as being “quite an **edifice**.”

So we all understand that **edification** is a **construction** process rather than a **demolition** process. The strong are not in the business of **tearing down** the structure of the weaker brother. Their only concern is the **building up** of the weaker brother or sister.

3) **THE LOVING RESPONSIBILITY OF THE STRONG TOWARD THE WEAK IS MODELED ON THE PATTERN OF CHRIST'S RELATIONSHIP WITH US**

Romans 15:3 & 7 - "For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me'....7....Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

In quoting **Psalms 69:9**, and placing these words into the mouth of Christ speaking to the Father, Paul draws our attention to the ***entire earthly mission*** of Jesus Christ. Both in His ***incarnation*** and His ***sacrificial death*** on the cross, Christ is the ultimate example of One who ***spent all His personal rights*** for the blessing of those who were, not only ***weak***, but positively ***rebellious***:

Philippians 2:4-8 - "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. [5] Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, [6] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, [7] but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, [8] he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

The conclusion of this lesson is made clear in the contrast held forth between **Romans 14:1** and **15:7** - "As for the one who is weak in faith, ***welcome him***, but not to quarrel over opinions....15:7.... Therefore ***welcome one another*** as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

Christ ***welcomed*** us and meekly gave Himself for us while our being ***weaker*** than He would be the understatement of the century. "There," says Paul. "Let that be your guide in how to ***bear with the failings of the weak***"(15:1).

4) THE LESSONS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

Romans 15:4-5 - “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. [5] May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus....”

The main idea here is we get **endurance** and **encouragement**(4) through the Scriptures because it's through the Scriptures that the **“God of endurance and encouragement”**(5) speaks. Notice the planned repetition of the exact words. When we study the **Scriptures** it is **God** who speaks. And He speaks to us through **all** of the Scriptures. The Old Testament was written to give hope and encouragement to New Testament people because **all** of the Scriptures point us to their fulfillment in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

But there's a second idea in these verses. It's never **easy** for any of us to pull in the reigns of our rights and freedoms - especially **legitimate** freedoms. Where does the strength to lay down our rights for others come from? It comes only from the power of a **greater hope**. We need to have something more solid and something bigger to aim our lives at than **immediate self-fulfillment**. We need a driving, consuming **future hope**.

With respect, we need to aim higher than merely having a **purpose driven life**. That purpose must be one which embraces a larger realm than our temporal fulfillment. And that kind of **eternal hope** can only be sustained through the enlightenment and promise of the Scriptures. It may not **feel** tingly every time you open your Bible. At times, studying it can feel laborious and dry. But something is happening at a deeper level than your emotions. **Hope** is anchoring, way down deep. Your **attention** is being gradually shifted. The strength from your study of God's Word today isn't necessarily **felt** today. But one day

soon it will be needed. Biblical hope **accrues**. Don't neglect the **hope sustaining power** that only the Scriptures can bring.

5) THE GOAL OF OUR CONGREGATIONAL LIFE TOGETHER

Romans 15:6-7 - "...that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. [7] Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."

Briefly, it's emphatically **not** enough that **your** life glorifies God. And it's not enough that **my** life glorifies God. God is not searching merely for our **individually** expressed praise and honor. He desires a **unified corporate expression of worship and honor to His name** - "...that **together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...**" (7). God desires a **unified witness** - a witness that **proves** He is the creator God of **all** people who is greater in our own perception than all that might ordinarily divide us.

Corporate unity shows what we truly praise because unity - and **disunity** - reveals what we truly prioritize and prize. That's why genuine, God-glorifying praise can only be manifested to this watching world in the **corporate** adoration and mutual submission of Christ's redeemed church.

Remember it every Sunday. God **doesn't** just crave your devotion to Him as you kneel in your prayer closet. Get with the body. Glorify God in a context where you can **prove** He is more precious to you than your own rights. And you can only demonstrate **that** kind of devotion when you lovingly and meekly worship along side your weaker brother.