

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

Sunday, October 25th, 2020 - 6:30 p.m.

Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

CONFIRMING GOD'S FAITHFULNESS, MAGNIFYING HIS MERCY, AND LIVING IN HOPE

Romans 15:8-16 - "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.' [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. [14] I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. [15] But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God [16] to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit."

One of the great advantages of studying a letter like Romans right through is you get to see not only the **truths** that were important in the mind of Paul, but you also learn, if you're careful and thoughtful, how he **arrives** at those truths.

In other words, you get to see not only the **ideas** but how he **approaches** and **applies** those ideas. You learn how to **study** the deep truths of God's Word because you discover not only the **destination** of Paul's thought, but the **journey** of it. If you want to learn how to **think** your way around the truths of the Scriptures, there is no substitute for the kind of study we're doing now together. We can learn how to **find** truth in God's Word.

Today's text is a great example of this. We finished our last study in **Romans 15:1-7**. This is where Paul focused on the duty of the strong to bear with the tender consciences of the weak. Those who were raised in Judaism, who had lived their whole lives equating the law of Moses with all there was to divine revelation from Almighty God, might have a hard time seeing many of those regulations terminating with the coming of Christ. They may well like to cling to regulations regarding feasts and days and fasts and the like. In other words, they still hadn't learned how to **internalize their freedom in Christ in terms of those issues of the law being fulfilled and laid aside**.

And Gentiles - those who didn't have to unload all of that Jewish heritage - who found it much easier to understand the way Christ **replaced** all those ceremonies in His own life, death and resurrection - **those** people could easily ride rough-shod over the scruples of their weaker, usually Jewish brothers and sisters.

And Paul commands them **not** to do that. They're to **serve** the weaker consciences of their brothers the way Christ served us all. They are to lay **their** rights aside the way Christ put aside **His**. They're to do **nothing** to train others to go against their conscience because, while **these** issues of ceremony may not be a big deal, other issues **are**. And I'm not to make it any easier for my brother to ignore his conscience on a **holiness** issue by leading him to ignore his conscience on an incidental issue.

Paul's main concern isn't that my drinking may turn someone else into an alcoholic. There are other passages that may steer in that direction in the New Testament. But that's not the main concern of our text in Romans. Paul's concern isn't that I may destroy my weaker brother's **sobriety**. It's that I may destroy his **faith** by leading him into actions his conscience won't allow.

So that's the summons of our previous text. That's the conclusion of the matter. Paul pointedly tells these Romans Christians what they should **do**. But Paul **never** just tells people what they should **do**. He always lays a **foundation**. He always builds a doctrinal base. There is always **theology** behind his **commands**.

And we need to **know** this theology. We are never just out to be **nice** people, or even **moral** people. We are never just out to be **loving** people. We're all, I hope, out to be **Godly** people. We want to know the **reasons of the Spirit of God** for the things He tells us to do and the changes He wants to make in our hearts. And Paul's words today show all of us there are **massive, weighty** reasons for the self-denying actions of the strong and the weak that are called for in the first seven verses of this fifteenth chapter. That's where we're going today.

- 1) **IF I DON'T UNDERSTAND THE BIG PLAN OF GOD I WILL ALWAYS FIND HIS COMMANDS UNREASONABLE**

Romans 15:8-12 - "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.'"

What's going on here? There's almost nothing that makes the Bible seem more boring than a string of Old Testament quotes threaded back to back. So why is Paul doing this right at this point? The whole thrust of chapters fourteen and fifteen seems so *practically oriented*. Why this sudden burst of Old Testament recitation?

Paul makes a very direct link. Did you see it at the end of verse 7 and the beginning of verse 8? "Therefore welcome one another [strong and weak alike] as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. [8] *For* [that means, "Here's the reason."] 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.'"

What would make a Jewish believer - one who had been raised his whole life to view any compromise of the Old Testament law as holy dereliction in the face of the will of Almighty God - what would make *that* Jewish Christian *stop* judging his Gentile brother who didn't keep any of the feast laws of holy days?

And, perhaps even closer to home for most of us Gentiles, what would make a Gentile Christian - one who had come to Christ without even *hearing* of the laws stinging the Jewish conscience - what would make *that* Gentile Christian vow to *never* exercise his freedom in eating and drinking again if his Jewish brother was offended?

Do we see how huge these questions are? This is highly relevant in today's church. What makes Christians *rein in their natural instincts of what's acceptable and unacceptable*? Paul gives these strong and weak Christians - these Jewish and Gentile believers - an overview of the whole plan of God to include both Jews and Gentiles in His redemptive purpose.

He does this because if they don't see how they are each to **fit in** - if they don't see Paul's words as part of a holy, divine **calling** - they will chafe against his words. They'll rationalize and excuse and argue. They won't **hear what the Spirit is saying to the church**.

We will all find obedience to the Lord more immediately palatable if, when our first reaction is to pretend we didn't hear Him speak, we remind ourselves of how His specific request is linked up with His overall plan. We make obedience tougher when we only see His **immediate call** rather than His **overall plan** to free us from self and draw us into His new creation.

This happens over and over in the church. Here are two people who are at odds with each other. They both know they **ought** to offer love and grace and forgiveness to each other, regardless of who's at fault. But they usually don't. And the reason they usually don't is they only see God's bare command - His immediate command to repent, humble-up, and make amends. And they don't **want** to make amends.

What they don't usually think through is there's a **reason** for the Holy Spirit's command to make amends. God's going to bring all His people together for all eternity. These two enemies are going to be very long-term roommates. And God wants to prepare each of them for that moment when they will, even if they don't believe it right now, fall into each other's arms in brotherly love and devotion. But they're not **thinking straight** right now. They are being **short-sighted**. Obedience is hard because they've forgotten God's big plan.

And so, in today's text, Paul calls to remembrance the big plan of God for Jew and Gentile. Particularly, that right from the beginning it was His will to bring both Jew and Gentile together into one people. Everything God did in creating the races of humanity, in sending His Son into the world and His Spirit into our hearts, was all **designed** to magnify the richness of His saving grace. This is the theology that makes the call to obedience reasonable and urgent. And Paul knows if they don't **think** right, they won't **obey** right. It's just that simple.

2) THE JEWS ARE TO REMEMBER GOD'S FAITHFULNESS TO HIS PROMISE TO ABRAHAM

Romans 15:8 - "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...."

God wasn't abandoning the Jew just because He was showing grace to the Gentile. Paul seems to underscore just how committed God was to the Jews by reminding them Christ **became** a Jew out of God's desire to show His deep commitment to the promise He made to Abraham.

The aim of this verse seems to be based on the recognition that the Jew (the weaker brother in Paul's argument) would have a tendency to **judge** the Gentile (the stronger in Paul's argument) for not feeling the same compulsion to the Old Testament law that he (the Jew) felt - **"...let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him"(14:3b).**

I don't have to feel threatened that the whole plan of God is going to pot just because someone takes a different view of propriety on a non-Scriptural issue. God, Paul assures the Jew, is still keeping his plan to His people and being faithful to His covenant with Abraham. He still has the "whole world in His hands."

3) **THE GENTILE IS CALLED, OVER AND OVER AGAIN, TO MAGNIFY GOD FOR HIS AMAZING GRACE**

Romans 15:9 - **"....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.'"**

This is the repeated theme right through **verses 10 through 12**. And the obvious point of application to all of us is we will find it easier to rein in our own rights for the sake of our **weaker brother** when we remember the depths to which God's grace went to reach **us**. Grace, fully relished and appreciated, always crucifies any expression of self-life in us. Grace received makes us **mimic** the Giver of grace.

Here again, we see the fleshing out of the first principle of this teaching: ***If I don't understand the big plan of God and appreciate my role in it, I will always find His commands unreasonable.*** But if I grasp the depth to which God, right from the very beginning, had it in His heart to **crucify His own Son** to extend His grace for my well-being, then any call to lay down my rights for my weaker brother is surely a burden that is **light**.

4) **GRASPING GOD'S BIG PLAN ENABLES A READY OBEDIENCE BY FILLING OUR MINDS WITH AN OVERPOWERING, ABIDING HOPE**

Romans 15:13 - "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."

If the call to obedience to both strong and weak is sometimes restrictive to the desires of the self, the narrowness of the *path* is made exciting by remembering the glory of the *destination*. And this is exactly the picture Jesus used to describe the upward call of discipleship:

Matthew 7:13-14 - "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. [14] For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."

What would possibly make people choose a *narrow* (confining) way over an option that is described as being both *wide* and *easy*(13)? It seems to make no sense. And the fact that it *doesn't* make sense to most people is obvious by the fact that Jesus says by far the vast majority of people, upon seeing both paths, *choose* the wide. Why? Because they're only looking at the *path* - not the *destination*.

Why would anyone willingly *choose* a narrow path - a path where you must lay down your own rights (like the strong for the weak) just to squeeze into it? ***Because they want a journey with hope.*** They want a path that ***goes somewhere.*** They want a path with ***hope*** at the end of it.

That path costs a great deal. It's no easy stroll. Luke throws in an additional detail about what it takes to choose the narrow path of hope - **Luke 13:24a** - "**Strive to enter through the narrow door....**" The cool and dispassionate need not even pretend to be followers of Jesus.

5) **BECAUSE KNOWING THE BIG PLAN OF GOD ENABLES A MORE READY OBEDIENCE, WE ARE IN CONSTANT NEED OF BEING REMINDED OF IT**

Romans 15:14-16 - "I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are

full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. [15] But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God [16] to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”

The weak Jew didn't need reminding that some of the Gentiles weren't keeping the same Old Testament regulations he was keeping. And the strong Gentile didn't need reminding that he had a freedom in Christ Jesus that didn't require an adoption of all the Old Testament feasts and fasts and regulations in order to be right with God. Each group had that much figured out.

What **both** were in danger of forgetting was the overall picture, the big plan of God for His creation. Mind you, they **knew** all about that plan. Paul makes it clear that it had been revealed right from God's first promise to Abraham. They weren't forgetting it the way you might forget where you **put your keys**. They were forgetting it the way you forget about **breathing**. They were taking it for granted. They weren't living in the grand truths of redemption **consciously** and **attentively**.

Never despise the work of the Holy Spirit in **reminding**. Never over assume. The narrow road always has its demands. Keep the power of God's eternal kingdom **hope** alive in your mind and heart. There are enough demands in life that you're going to need it over and over again until Jesus returns. And that's why His coming is called **“the blessed hope!”**