

On Differences: Part 3

Romans 15:1-13

November 6, 2011

In the last two weeks we have looked at Paul's instruction to the church in Rome to encourage them to stop judging and looking down on each other. Paul is trying to encourage unity in the congregation as disagreement arose over issues that are not clearly addressed in scripture. In cases where the Bible does not say something is a sin Paul has argued that we are free to follow our consciences as long as we do not cause the temptation or fall of one of our brothers and sisters. In this morning's text, Paul continues this argument.

Paul has called those who understand and exercise their freedom strong, and those who still believe unaddressed issues to be sin he calls weak. He continues with these designations, including himself among the strong. *"We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.' For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."* (vv.1-4) The first couple of verses are a review of the conversation so far, except that Paul is no longer addressing the weak. From this point on his instruction is only to the strong and how they are to use their freedom. While we have freedom, we are to be willing to set it aside and do what is good for our brothers and sisters. Bearing with those who are weak goes beyond

merely tolerating them. It means loving them enough to allow their weakness to change our behavior. Our relationships with them and their relationships with God are to be more important to us than exercising our freedom in Christ. We must do what **builds** each other up.

Paul now gives a new reason to take this position. Up to this point the reason was love for one another. Now, Paul points us to the example of Jesus. Jesus set aside His rights and freedoms in order to build relationships with us and bring us salvation. God the Son gave up the glory, honor, and majesty of being God in order to step into our world as a servant and to die for our salvation. To make this point, Paul quoted from Psalm 69 by king David and applied David's words to Jesus. David wrote:

"For I endure scorn for your sake, and shame covers my face. I am a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my own mother's sons; for zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall on me." (Psalm 69:7-9)

Paul saw Jesus in this description. As Paul looked at the example Jesus set, he was drawn to the last statement in which David, and Jesus, took personally the insults made against God. If Jesus is willing to set aside worship in order to be scorned and mocked, we must be willing to endure undeserved scorn and insults as well. We most certainly must not scorn or insult each other.

Paul said that everything in the scripture, that which was written in the past, is for our **instruction**.

Many people teach that the Old Testament no longer matters since we are no longer under the law, but are now under grace. Others go as far as saying that the New Testament has some good ideas, but much of it is no longer binding on us. Paul does not allow either of these positions.

The scripture is given to us for our instruction. While we are to be controlled by the Spirit, Paul is pointing out here that the Spirit will not lead us to disobey God's word, but will bring us into greater obedience to it. Jesus Himself demanded a greater obedience to the law than those around Him required, or could require. His society demanded outward obedience and conformity. Jesus demanded that we also obey the law in our thoughts and desires.

The law no longer holds the threat of punishment over those who are in Jesus Christ. Jesus has borne that punishment on their behalf. The law still serves to guide and direct their lives as God's instruction about how we are to live. We who are in Christ are not longer dominated by the Law, but Paul says what was written—without qualification or limitation—is to teach us. It is there to show us how God wants us to live and to give us encouragement.

I was intrigued this week by a conversation between a couple members of this congregation before the Tuesday Bible Study. One of the members of this church has been reading Psalm 119, and was talking about how much she enjoys it. Psalm 119 is one of her favorites, and it helps her in her relationship with God. I understand what she is saying, as I have the same reaction to it. What is interesting about this is that Psalm

119 is a song of praise, not of God directly, but of His law. It is as we read about all the benefits and blessings of having God's law that we come to love God more for giving it to us. It encourages us to know that God has not left us on our own, but instead has told us how to be in good relationship with Him and each other.

As we endure in our faith, and receive encouragement from the scripture, we have **hope**. Because God has been faithful to give us His word and His Spirit, we know that He will be faithful to carry out the rest of His will in us. Our hope rests in His strength and faithfulness. Through the Holy Spirit and the scripture we have everything we need to fulfill God's call on us and to live in the hope of His salvation.

Endurance and encouragement are not the only things Paul wants God to give us. Paul said, "*May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" (vv.5,6) This is Paul's desire for the church, and it is Jesus' desire as well. On the night before Jesus' crucifixion, Jesus prayed that His disciples and those who would believe because of their witness (that's us) would be one, even as He and the Father are one. Paul repeats that prayer here. He calls on the very same God who gave us His Spirit and His word for our endurance and encouragement to also give us unity.

There is one condition to this unity that we must not miss. We are to be united as we **follow** Christ Jesus. Those who are following Christ Jesus cannot have unity with those who deny Him and follow the desires of their

flesh and hearts. Those who are redeemed and regenerated by the work of the Holy Spirit cannot have unity with those who reject or twist what Jesus taught, especially about the law. As Martin Lloyd-Jones said in 1962, “The starting point in considering the question of unity must always be regeneration and belief of the truth. Nothing else produces unity, and, as we have seen clearly, it is impossible apart from this.” If we are in Christ, we cannot seek unity with those who are not in Christ or who do not stand on the truth of God’s word.

All of those who are in Christ and committed to His truth, however, will be united and will glorify God, the true God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We will worship and praise Him together with one heart and one mouth. That is, we will share the same love for Him and the same praise and adoration of Him. We will believe the same things about Him—the truth that He has revealed in his word. We will be united in our commitment to living out the mission He has given us to share the gospel and announce the Kingdom of God.

Since all who are in Christ are thus on the same page and are united and working together through the word and the Holy Spirit Paul has one more instruction. *“Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”* (v.7) If you are in Jesus, then He has accepted you. If Jesus has accepted our brothers and sisters, what ground do we have on which to reject one another? If something is not a problem for Jesus, whether it be freedom He purchased with His blood, or conscientious commitment to old, replaced ways, why should it be a problem for us? As we learn to get past these disputable matters and ground

our relationships on things that really matter it will bring praise to God. We will celebrate that the things which used to divide us no longer matter. Both the love that we have for each other and Jesus’ example drive us to the same conclusion. The **blood** of Christ, which binds together those who are saved, is far more important and far stronger than these disputable things that threaten to tear them apart.

Bringing us back to this, Paul says, *“For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy . . .”* (vv.8,9) We are brought back to need for humility. Jesus was humble and so must we be. Jesus gave up His rights and so must we. It is all part of following, of being like, our Lord, Master, Savior, and Friend. As we saw in Martin Luther’s quote we are reminded again, as Christian people we are free and servants of none but God, but also servants of all. Jesus served the Jews and in so doing fulfilled God’s promises, and the result is that the Gentiles are glorifying God, in Rome and around the world! God demonstrated His mercy and the world has seen it.

Paul went on to quote from a number of Old Testament sources to demonstrate that the goal of God’s work has always gone beyond just the redemption of the Jews to include the salvation of the Gentiles. Time and again the Old Testament calls on God’s people to take the message of His existence and His praise to those around them. Time and again it calls on the Gentiles to join in that praise and to worship God. God is not the God of the Jews alone. He is the Sovereign of the

universe. Everything is created by Him and under his jurisdiction. All people, therefore, are to recognize the truth and call out to Him in praise for His power, might, and love, and for forgiveness for their sin. God chose Israel that He might work through them, but He never intended to limit His love and power just to them. Just as much as the Jews, the Gentiles have their hope in God. Both Jews and Gentiles only have hope through the **gospel** of Jesus Christ that brings the Kingdom of God.

Because of that, Paul can call on God to do one more thing for His people. *“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”* (v.13) People who are filled with hope in God’s power and faithfulness will also be filled with joy and peace. If we have the knowledge that we are in His hands then we can rest in Him. As we trust Him we find we never need to worry and the hope we have can overflow in us. This is the work of the Holy Spirit and can only come from Him. Paul prays that the Holy Spirit might pour out this joy and peace on those who belong to Jesus Christ. Just as salvation only comes through faith in Jesus, life must be lived in light of the **cross** if it is to truly be lived at all. Hope, joy, and peace are all found the same place we find redemption and forgiveness for our sins—at the foot of the cross. Focus on Jesus and the cost of salvation. Seek God’s forgiveness and to be in right relationship with Him. Everything else will fade away as live in the light of His glory, the knowledge of His faithfulness, and the hope that comes from the Holy Spirit.