

“By the Power of the Holy Spirit”

Sermons on Romans # 35

Texts: Romans 15:1-13; Isaiah 11:1-10

Having made the case that God justifies the wicked through faith in Jesus Christ, at some point in this epistle Paul must address the subject of Christian liberty. The issue is simply this: Since we are justified by the merits of Christ, who fulfilled the righteous requirements of the law by his perfect obedience, this means that we are not bound in any sense to those things not commanded in God’s word. But how do we relate to those who still think it wrong to do certain things, even when such things are not forbidden in Scripture? Paul discusses this matter using the categories of weak and strong, the weak being those who have scruples about things not forbidden in Scripture.

The fact that there are both weak and strong in the church in Rome is the reason why in Romans 14, Paul pronounces all foods clean. Paul must prevent the weak (the Jews) from trying to force Gentile converts to Christianity to live as Jews and keep a kosher diet, in effect, speaking of good things as though they were evil, something the apostle forbids. The feuding between the weak and strong is also why Paul exhorts the Christians in Rome to keep the particulars of their Lord’s Day observance as a matter between themselves and God, before going on to exhort them not to judge their brothers and sisters when it comes to any disputable matter. Since we all belong to the Lord, who alone is judge of all things (including our personal behavior), let us not bicker about such things as food and drink, or what we do or do not do on the Lord’s Day. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of food and drink, but a matter of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

In Romans 12, Paul began the so-called practical section of this letter by exhorting Christians to stop being conformed to the pattern of this world and to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. As we learn to think like Christians and stop thinking like pagans, our conduct will change accordingly. As Paul has pointed out, this change in our behavior will manifest itself in a number of ways: genuine humility, love for our brothers and sisters, submission to legitimate governing authorities, prompt and full payment of our debts, and a biblical sexual ethic in which fornication and adultery are regarded as sins. Paul speaks of this change in our thinking as clothing ourselves in Jesus Christ. While we are already clothed with Christ by virtue of our baptism and union with Christ, we also are to clothe ourselves with Christ on a daily basis. We do this by putting to death the deeds of the flesh and as we daily rise to newness of life. As we are clothed with Christ we will begin to manifest the kind of behavior described throughout these final chapters of Romans.

Without breaking verbal stride, Paul moves from his discussion of Christian liberty in Romans 14:1-12, to the way of peace and love with the Roman congregation (Romans 14:13-23). Almost seamlessly, Paul continues his discussion of Christian unity in the first thirteen verses of chapter 15. For Paul, nothing would be more tragic than for a congregation of Christian believers to fight over trivial matters such as food and drink. Since the gospel is not at stake in the church in Rome as it was in Galatia, Paul’s focus is not upon uncompromisingly opposing false teachers, but upon getting those who disagree about food and drink to put such things in context and consider the need for unity in the church.

As we turn to our text (the first part of Romans 15), Paul continues to make the case for the importance of Christian unity, continuing his discussion of how the weak and the strong are to relate to each other.

In Romans 15:1, Paul writes, “*We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.*” Paul’s language is emphatic and he continues to assign to the strong—the group with which the apostle now identifies himself—full responsibility in their dealings with their weaker brothers and sisters. The weak are those who fail to grasp the fact that all things are clean and whose consciences will not allow them to do certain things not forbidden in Scripture. In order to encourage the weak, the strong are exhorted to bear with them, precisely because the strong are able to deal with those who have not fully comprehended the issues at hand. The focus here is upon putting the needs of others before the exercise of our personal freedom. When the gospel is not at stake, Paul puts people over principle.

Given the natural human propensity toward self-interest, we should not be surprised that some of the strong may bully the weak or otherwise treat them with disdain. This, of course, works the other way as well, as when the weak consider the exercise of Christian liberty on the part of the strong to be some kind of personal affront when the strong eat and drink things which the weak do not approve of. Rather, than looking down on each other, Paul instructs the strong to bear with the weak with the goal of turning the weak (one who is unable to bear with others) into those who are able (strong). The final clause of verse 1 makes this plain. We are not to seek to please ourselves. In effect, this statement effectively summarizes a number of things that Paul has already told us in the preceding chapters:

Do not think more highly of yourselves than you ought (12:3)

That we all have different gifts, according to the grace given to us (12:6)

That we should be devoted to each other in brotherly love (12:10)

That we should honor one another above ourselves (12:10)

That we should not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position (12:16)

That we should live at peace with everyone (12:18)

That he who loves his fellow man fulfills the law (13:8)

That the commandments (second table) are summed up by “Love your neighbor as yourself” (13:9)

That love does no harm to its neighbor because it fulfills the law (13:10)

And that we are not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature (13:14)

With these exhortations already set forth, Paul’s point here is that we are not to seek to please ourselves, but rather we are to do as instructed in the next verse, “*each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.*” From this statement it is clear that it is not the prerogative of the strong to lord it over his neighbor or flaunt his freedom in front of someone, who is, presumably, the weaker brother mentioned earlier. Rather, because of his strength, the strong must endeavor to build up his neighbor, seeking his good—that which is for the edification of the church and which will help the weak become strong—while at the same time keeping the weak from continually dragging the church down to his own “weak” level. While the strong must bear with the weaknesses of the weak, the strong must not allow the weak to eliminate Christian liberty. The strong bear with the weak, until the weak become strong!

This is a very important point, because the tendency in most churches today is that when the weak object to something, the weak immediately and completely prevail. One classic example of this is the replacement in most churches of wine by grape juice during communion, simply because someone who is weak objected to the use of wine. As Leon Morris notes: “This principle (doing something for someone else’s good) must be applied with care, for great harm is done when Christians assume that in all circumstances they know what is good for other people. It must be done with humility. But it is necessary, for we may find it very easy to please people by doing or permitting something that is really harmful in the long run. The point is that we must constantly seek to do what is for the good of our neighbor rather than what is for our own good. This does not mean that the weak control the church—that they have only to express a scruple and all rush to conform. That would mean that the church would be permanently tied to the level of the weak and that life and growth would cease. Paul is not laying down a rule of conduct but enunciating a principle of tender concern. The strong must respect the weak; they must not hurt them and at all times they must strive for what is for their good.”¹

Of course, what is ultimately in the best interests of the weak is that as they increase in wisdom and as they continue to reflect upon these matters, eventually become strong! Paul assigns full responsibility for this process to the strong, who, theoretically should be able to discern if the gospel is at stake (as in Galatians), and if it is not (as it is in Rome), and then do what is necessary to build the weaker brother or sister up into someone who is strong, now able to enjoy Christian liberty with a clear conscience.

The principle of not seeking to please ourselves, but to build others up can be best exemplified in the active obedience of Christ who never gave offense to anyone, and yet never waived while fulfilling all righteousness. As Paul notes in verse 3. “*For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.’*” Jesus’ life is certainly an exemplary one which we as Christians must endeavor to imitate. But Christ’s life is much, much, more than a mere example to us that we can imitate—i.e. “what would Jesus do?”

Jesus obeyed the commandment to love his neighbor perfectly, as proven by the citation from Psalm 69. When repeatedly insulted, Jesus never responded in kind to those insulting him. In fact, in Luke 22:42, Jesus declared that the very purpose of his messianic ministry is to do the will of the father, not his own will: “*Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.*” Because Jesus fulfilled the law for us—loving his neighbor perfectly, not responding to insults heaped upon in like manner—through faith in him, we are reckoned as righteous as though we had also loved our neighbor perfectly. But the very thought of Jesus loving his neighbor when insulted without cause, should fill our hearts with gratitude, so that we begin to live not to please ourselves, but instead, to please others. Because Jesus fulfils all righteousness, he is our example. We do not imitate Jesus to become righteous, but because through faith in him, we have already been reckoned righteous. Now we are to live like it by doing good to our neighbor and building them up!

For Paul, the Scriptures play a central role in this process of living so as not to please ourselves, but to serve others in love. In verse 4, Paul writes “*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.*” The best translation of the first part of this phrase is probably something like “all that was written in Scripture,” which indicates that Scripture was given not only for our instruction, but also to give us endurance and hope. Recall that in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Paul writes, “*All Scripture is God-breathed and*

¹ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 498.

is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Because Scripture is given by God, it will not only teach us what it means to be clothed with Christ, Scripture tells us how the process of sanctification turns out in the end. Seeing the goal to which God is directing us gives us both hope and endurance. We’ve already read the final chapter of the redemptive drama, so we know how the story turns out in the end. Despite what we may be going through now, we know what will become of us in the end. This gives us an eternal perspective on our temporal suffering. We really do need to see the big picture.

This is the application we have already drawn from Paul’s prior discussion of hope in Romans 8:18-25. If we understand the relationship between the “already” and the “not yet,” (what we are in “Christ” right now, as opposed to what we will be when Christ comes back) then we will see the goal even in the midst of the struggle to get along with our neighbor and to become more like Christ. Seeing the goal—perfect conformity to the image of Christ in our glorification—not only gives us endurance until the day wherein we actually become like Christ, it gives us the proper perspective to become more “Christlike” in the present. Knowing what we will become on the day of resurrection is vital in knowing who we are as we await that great and glorious day. Knowing what we will become also gives us the hope as well as the encouragement to get there. Seeing the goal certainly encourages us to persevere.

This point leads Paul to offer a short prayer-wish in verses 5-6, which is almost spontaneously introduced. This prayer takes the form of an exhortation as Paul exhorts the Romans by letting them know what he is praying for.² Says Paul, “*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.*” Realizing that God freely gives to us in the gospel what he requires of us under the law, Paul petitions the God who gives us endurance and encouragement to also give the Christians in Rome a spirit of unity, so that together, as the people of God, they give glory to the Son of God, with one heart and mouth. For Paul, what is paramount here is that the unity of the church be maintained. If the church is one, it is because people have stopped fighting over the trivialities of food and drink. It is because the kingdom of God is manifest through word and sacrament and that kingdom is a matter of righteousness, peace and joy.

Paul now begins to wrap up his discussion of the weak and strong which he started to develop in the previous chapter.³ In order to bring this discussion to a close, in verse 7, Paul returns to the theme he first established back in Romans 12:3, namely that we should not think of ourselves more highly than we ought, since we are all justified sinners. “*Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*” Furthermore, in Romans 14:1 Paul exhorted the strong to accept the person who was weak in faith and regarded certain things as unclean. Now Paul exhorts all believers to accept each other, because both weak and strong have been accepted by Christ.⁴ Thus the weak have to accept the strong, despite the fact that the strong may exercise their freedom in such a way as to offend the weak, just as the strong must accept the weak. The reason for this is that both the weak and the strong are united to Christ through faith. Both groups are in the present possession of the forgiveness of sins. Both weak and strong have been covered by the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. Both have been

² Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 871.

³ The Greek $\delta\iota\omicron$ indicates a conclusion is to follow.

⁴ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 873.

accepted by Christ and are, therefore, to realize that God has accepted them despite their sins and so now they are to accept one other. The reason for this should be obvious to both strong and weak—the unity and common purpose between these two groups brings about praise to God.

As is his custom, Paul moves from the theoretical to the redemptive-historical. He does so to illustrate his point by examining the promises God made in the Old Testament which impact both groups, which is why Paul now cites a number of passages from the prophets to make his point. The emphatic assertion “I say” (NIV, “for I tell you”) indicates that what follows is important and has great doctrinal significance.⁵ Thus in verses 8-11, Paul will now reiterate one of the main themes laid out earlier in Romans 4, namely that the inclusion of the Gentiles into the church is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. “*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, as it is written: ‘Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name.’ Again, it says, ‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people. And again, ‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples.’ And again, Isaiah says, ‘The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him.’”*

There are a number of things going on in these verses and it is important to consider them. For one thing, since both weak and strong have been accepted in Christ, it is interesting that Paul now launches into a discussion of the benefits both Jew and Gentile derive because God is faithful to the promises he made to Israel’s patriarchs, promises which included the Gentiles. This abrupt change from a discussion of strong and weak to the mention of Jew and Gentile in redemptive-history can only mean one thing—that Paul regards Jews as more apt to be included in the category of the weak and Gentiles among the strong.⁶ This would certainly have come as a difficult matter to Jews in the Roman church. Indeed, Paul’s use of the formula “*as it is written,*” makes the point that the Old Testament predicted God’s inclusion of the Gentiles in his redemptive purposes in such a way that both Jew and Gentiles now together give glory to God since they are both accepted in Christ Jesus.

Then Paul goes on to say that Christ became a servant of the circumcision (NIV, “the Jews”) so as to bring to fruition the promise God made to the patriarchs. This not only echoes our Lord’s own assertion in Matthew 15:24 that he was sent “*only to the lost sheep of Israel,*” but in Galatians 4:4, Paul saw the ministry of Christ in a similar light: “*But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.*” The fact that Paul uses the perfect tense in Romans 15:8—Christ *has become* the servant of the circumcision (the Jews)—seems to indicate that in his death and resurrection, Christ continues to minister to the Jews in that many of them have already come to faith in that one who is the seed promised to Abraham, and in whom all the nations would be blest.⁷ This means that in his office as covenant mediator, Christ remains a servant to Israel so as to bring God’s covenant promises to final fulfillment. This also seems to indicate that there is a role yet for Israel in the future of redemptive history, when many Jews are grafted back into the righteous root immediately before the end of the age.

⁵ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 875.

⁶ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 876.

⁷ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 877.

In verse 9, Paul tells us that God's mercy ensured that salvation came to the Gentiles, this time citing Psalm 18:49. This fits with what he has just said in Romans 9-11. Since the Gentiles become God's people not on the basis of anything other than God's mercy, how can they now lord or flaunt their freedom over those who are weak, i.e., those Jews who still had scruples about the dietary laws, special days and religious ceremonies? People who claim to be saved by God's mercy, but who nevertheless think of themselves as superior to everyone else, really do not understand very much about mercy! This point is further supported in verses 10 and 11 by additional citations from the Old Testament (Psalm 67:5 and 117:1), *Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people. And again, 'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples.'*"

Citing from our Old Testament lesson (Isaiah 11), Paul reminds us in verse 12 that the root of Jesse (Israel's Messiah) will spring up to rule over all the Gentile nations. This was God's redemptive-historical purpose from the beginning, that in the messianic age the gospel would go out to the ends of the earth. This makes the assertion of our dispensational friends, that the church is a mystery in the Old Testament, absolutely untenable. It is clear when you look at the big picture, there is only one people of God throughout redemptive history—national Israel from the time of Abraham until the coming of Jesus—and then the church, which is composed of all those who believe in Jesus, whether they be Jew in Gentile, or weak or strong. It is the root of Jesse who will spring up and rule the nations as the Gentiles place their hope in him. Thus, the Jews in the church in Rome must not see Gentile converts to Israel's Messiah as interlopers, who don't really belong among the people of God. As the strong are not to place stumbling blocks in the path of the weak, so too, Jews are not to exclude Gentiles through the use of so-called "ethnic badges," i.e., circumcision, kosher foods, feast days and Jewish ceremonies. The coming of the root of Jesse has done away with these things, and while the weak still cling to them, the time has come for the weak to become strong. This means that the Jews must accept the Gentiles, and indeed, learn the meaning of Christian liberty from them.

In verse 13, Paul concludes this line of argument by once again interjecting yet another prayer-wish, exhorting the Romans by letting them know what he is praying for: *"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."* In many ways, these few words not only summarize the practical section of Romans, but also the epistle as a whole.⁸ Not only have the Gentiles set their on Israel's God (the root of Jesse), so Paul prays to the God of hope. Paul petitions the Lord to fill the Roman Christians—both weak and strong, Jew and Gentile—with joy and peace (fruits of the presence of the kingdom). Thus joy and hope arise in connection with faith (*"as you trust in him"*). And since we united to Christ through faith, Paul's prayer is that all the Roman Christians would overflow with hope, hope which can come only through the power of the Holy Spirit.⁹ Paul's point seems to be that as faith increases, so does hope. And God creates both—faith comes from hearing the word of Christ (i.e., the gospel), while the Holy Spirit creates an overflowing hope as we consider the promises and faithfulness of God, who is the God of hope.

As Paul concludes the practical section of his epistle, he marvels at how God unites both Jew and Gentile, weak and strong, together into one body through the saving work of Jesus Christ, who is the promised root of Jesse. The result of this fulfillment of prophecy is that God receives the glory as one body is formed from different peoples. Furthermore, the blessed Holy Spirit causes us to overflow with

⁸ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 880.

⁹ The force of ἐν is instrumental. Cf. Cranfield, *Commentary on Romans*, II.748.

hope as we contemplate the glories of the age to come. For in the midst of the suffering and struggle we must endure in this present evil age, God graciously gives to us a glimpse of what we will become. And by the power of the Holy Spirit we overflow with hope because that Holy Spirit enables us to look back at the course of redemptive history and observe how God has fulfilled all of the glorious promises he made to us through the prophets of old. Thus we can be assured that God will fulfill all of the promises made to us regarding the future. Keeping our eyes on the goal gives us hope in the meantime. For the same God who has saved both weak and strong from the guilt and power of sin, and has set us free from those things which once enslaved us, is indeed the God of hope and the Lord of the future. And he is the God of hope, because in Jesus Christ, he has kept all of his promises. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, he will assure us that he will fulfill all of those promises which remain.