

## **“BEARING THE WEAK” (Romans 15:1-14)**

In Romans chapter 15, Paul continues his theme from chapter 14, showing the stronger brother's responsibility toward the weaker brother. However, in 15:1-14 there is a more positive emphasis on what the stronger brother should be doing. Paul sets forth in v1-2 a general principle that should govern the stronger brother's conduct. Then the apostle points to the ultimate example of Christ in v3-14 to illustrate and motivate us to act like the Master to our weaker brethren. This section represents Paul's formal conclusion to the major doctrinal argument of the entire Epistle to the Romans. The remainder of the epistle will be more of a personal postscript.

### **(1) THE GENERAL PRINCIPLE (v1-2)**

Paul begins chapter fifteen by giving another summary principle here of what the Christian life should be, *“We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification.”* The apostle is calling here for a denial of self – a crucifixion of self by every believer.

Self is one of the greatest enemies in the life of a believer and in the life of a church. Humility and self-denial is a bitter pill for us all to swallow. Great trouble and division has been caused by the advancement of self. In the third epistle of John we have a vivid portrayal of this. Here is a church torn apart because of the ego of one man. There was a man there called Diotrephes who was consumed by self (3 John 9-10). Diotrephes spoke against faithful brethren and went as far as to force them out of the assembly. This is he did under false pretenses because of the desire to exalt self. A lady once came to Jesus Christ in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper. She took a costly alabaster box of perfume and anointed His body for His burial. The Lord paid her this wonderful tribute, *“She hath done what she could.”* (Mark 14:8) This would be a wonderful epitaph to inscribe on your gravestone. By contrast, the statement concerning Diotrephes would be an awful inscription *“loveth to have the preeminence among them.”*

Instead of exalting self like Diotrephes, the apostle Paul declares, *“We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves.”* Paul includes himself among the strong. The word *“ought”* here has the idea of a moral duty owed. Now, there is a wonderful balance here in the words of Paul. It is not that we are here simply please others by compromising the truths of Scripture. Remember, it was the apostle Paul who declared, *“For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ”* (Gal. 1:10; cf. 1 Thess. 2:4). Rather, we are to please or serve our brethren, *“for his good to edification.”* What is good for our brother is only what God defines as *“good”* in Scripture. This may not be what our weaker brother feels or believes is good.

### **(2) CHRIST'S EXAMPLE - SACRIFICE (v3-6)**

The apostle Paul does not give some sentimental story to try and reinforce the principle he has set forth in v1-2. Instead, he points to the greatest possible example to his readers to back up the principle – Jesus Christ. This provides for us the perfect example and motivation for fulfilling the preceding exhortation. Paul points out that our Saviour lived a life for others, *“For even Christ pleased not Himself.”* The march from the splendours of heaven down to that manger in Bethlehem, and then on to the agonies of the Cross was not an exaltation of self.

Paul backs this up that Christ did this willingly and with meekness by a quotation drawn from the messianic Psalm 69:9, *“but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached Thee fell on Me.”* The world hates God. Jesus Christ willingly went to go and bear the blasphemies, scorn, and hatred of the world against His Father. In another epistle, Paul gave a classic unfolding of the servant hood of Christ (cf. Philippians 2:3-9). We must also note the patience of Christ with His disciples. They often misunderstood Him, disobeyed Him, doubted Him, and even denied Him

but what longsuffering He exhibited. The Master bore with them and gently led them to maturity. What men they turned out to be in the book of Acts. The change in Peter in Acts 2 is incredible. The change in him in 2 Peter where he reflects the loving, longsuffering pastor is just as amazing.

So what Paul is calling us to do is to live like Christ by living for others. His whole life on earth was occupied in ministry to others. As He suffered such reproach and sacrifice on our behalf so we should be willing to accept reproaches and sacrifice for His sake. When we seek to please men, we must do so as our Lord did. Then we will be serving our brethren, *“for his good to edification”* (v3). Yes, there are freedoms granted to us in certain areas, but they are not for us to selfishly please ourselves. All too often, we take the easier road of undermining one another instead of the harder road of building each other up.

OT VALUE - In v4 the apostle adds a parenthetical thought, *“For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.”* Having demonstrated the value of the OT Scriptures in v3, he gives some further thoughts about its value. He makes clear that the OT is neither irrelevant nor is it to be used to entertain nor for merely historical interest. The OT is not just *a* good commentary on the NT but it is *the* commentary on the NT.

That is why preachers should primarily seek to draw their illustrations from the OT when possible. Such illustrations are inspired and come therefore with the power of the Spirit of God. As we contemplate the lives of the OT saints what comfort and hope they inject into our souls. Read about Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. These men did not live for self! Who has not been uplifted, rebuked, instructed by the courage and faith of Joseph in his adversity and Daniel in the lion’s den? Who has not been blessed at the selflessness of Jonathan in wanting to give up his claim to the throne for David when he perceived it was God’s will for his beloved friend to be king? All of the OT Scripture is profitable in our lives, as *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”* (2 Tim. 3:16). By sharp contrast, you will not find real hope in this world. J. Vernon McGee points out,

“You won’t find any hope in the daily newspaper. You won’t find any hope in modern literature. Look at any field and see if you can find any hope. There is none whatsoever. It is dark and dismal when you look out at this world today. My friend, the only place you can find real hope is in the Word of God.”

Winston Churchill was the inspirational British Prime Minister in the Second World War. His words inspired a generation to resist the power of Hitler. However, his last words were reported, “there is no hope.” Such a remark is the honest view of life from the perspective of the unsaved. That is because he has no anchor for his life in something eternal. But it is not the view of the believer, who can say with the OT saints like Job, *“Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him: but I will maintain mine own ways before Him”* (Job 13:15) and who boldly declared, *“For I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth”* (Job 19:25). God has not left His children without comfort and hope. It is tragic that so many Christians fall into depression and hopelessness in their lives by not meditating on the source of hope – the examples and promises of Scripture. They will go to everything and everyone instead of what God has provided.

The apostle ends his argument in this sub-section in v5-6 not in a shout of triumph because he has won an argument, but with a prayer, *“Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* It is interesting to note that when we live like Christ for others and not self, this will bring unity and this unity will bring glory to God. Bringing glory to God is not reserved to leading souls to Christ or going to the mission field. Just living for others and promoting unity in the church will do it. The supreme purpose of Christian unity is not to please

other believers or ourselves but to please the Lord. It is the spirit of John the Baptist who cried, “*He must increase; but I must decrease*” (John 3:30).

The world has certain categories of persons that they regard as insignificant and to be taken advantage of. But the church has a different approach. We are called to exhibit a unity in diversity. We may be from different races, cultures, languages, educational backgrounds, talents, but we are one family in Christ. We must be like a choir with differing parts such as alto, bass, tenor, soprano but producing a beautiful harmonious sound of the one message as one choir conductor leads them.

This is not easy for any of us. Suppression of self is not natural to us. It is especially difficult for Singaporeans as we are so pampered and have so many rights. But we must live for others like the Master. He lived for others again and again and again. Just think that if Christ had not given up His infinitely greater rights and paid an infinitely greater sacrifice, we would all be lost in hell forever. It is true that there are awkward customers in the church. People who cannot get along with themselves let alone with others! But we are called to bear with them in love and patience. The world will not do this, but we walk to a different beat.

### (3) CHRIST’S EXAMPLE - ACCEPTANCE (v7-14)

Paul then presents another part of the life and work of Christ as an example to us, “*Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.*” In Romans 14:3 he pointed out that Christ has received the weaker brethren whereas here in chapter 14 he gives the additional insight that, “*Christ also received us to the glory of God.*” This is not because there is any good in us, but “*to the glory of God.*”

So, we are called to include in our fellowship all those who Christ has received. It doesn’t matter how weak or insignificant they are in the world’s eyes. All believers are called to accept one another in love and understanding. In v8-12 the apostle breaks this down between Jews and Gentiles. He wonderfully and wisely does this to show the interdependency and unity of both groups within the eternal plan of God.

In v8 he shows that Jesus Christ became a “*minister of the circumcision.*” The word, “*minister*” is the Greek word *diakonos*, which carries the idea of a servant. Often it refers to a menial or mundane activities such as waiting on tables or caring for household needs. So Christ became the humble servant to the Jews to fulfill the OT covenantal promises, “*to confirm the promises made unto the fathers.*”

Then in v9-12 Paul shows by 4 quotations from the OT that Christ’s serving the Jews opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles. These quotations are not random but deliberately selected from the 3 great divisions of the Hebrew Bible and from the writings of 3 of the most revered men in Judaism – Moses, David, and Isaiah. It proves that the OT Scripture unfolded God’s great purpose in saving the Gentiles. The Scripture repeatedly emphasise this purpose and consequent unity of these two groups for the glory of God. So this unity Paul is calling for is not something personal to him as the apostle to the Gentiles.

The first quotation of v9, “*And that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name*” is from 2 Samuel 22:50 and Psalm 18:49. It is a quotation where David the greatest Jewish king is looking forward to praising God among the Gentiles. The next quotation from v10 is a command by Moses for the Gentiles in Deuteronomy 32:43 to praise the Lord among the Jews, “*Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with His people.*”

In v11 the Gentiles are commanded to praise the Lord themselves by the Psalmist in Psalm 117:1, “*Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles; and laud him, all ye people.*” The final quotation in v12 is from Isaiah 11:10 where Isaiah points to the fact that there is coming a day when the Gentiles will be ruled by the Messiah and they will trust in Him, “*And again, Esaias saith, There shall be a root of Jesse, and He that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in Him shall the Gentiles trust.*” It is worth noting that Paul reiterates that salvation for both Jews and Gentiles is by Christ alone, “*in Him shall the Gentiles trust.*”

There is a wonderful progression here in these quotations. In v9 the Jews glorify God among the Gentiles, in v10 the Gentiles rejoice with the Jews, in v11 the Jews and Gentiles together praise God, and in v12 the Messiah is pictured reigning over Jews and Gentiles. By this clever selection of appropriate OT quotations, the apostle has demonstrated to his Jewish readers that God always purposed to save the Gentiles. But at the same time he shows to his Gentile readers how dependant they are on the Jews for the blessings of salvation. So all readers can conclude they are all united in Christ in the purpose and plan of God. Hence all should receive one another as such. It is true that many Jewish believers in Rome could trace their lineage back 50 generations and point to over a 1,000 years of unbroken history to the Patriarchs. But they were still united by salvation in Christ to the pagan Gentile slave who was just recently saved from a life of immorality and idolatry. Likewise we have people here who have been Christians for generations, whereas others are the only believer in their whole family circle. Some have been believers for 40 or 50 years, whereas others have been believers for just a few months. But all of us are in one family.

We are called to accept and receive one another as such, to serve one another, deny self, and encourage one another. You may wonder how can a new convert strengthen more mature believers? Every Christian has had some experience of God's grace; even if they have been saved just a few hours. They can edify others by recounting this, by praying for others, by serving others, and even attending church etc.

In v13 the apostle Paul ends with a magnificent benediction, "*Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.*" That is what Paul lived for. He is not simply seeking to win an argument, but a person. This was a great church in Rome (cf. Rom. 1:8), but we know from Romans 14 that there were already troublemakers there. Yet, Paul always thought the highest of other believers, "*And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another*" (v14). How do they get this life described in v1-12? Paul gives the answer – by, "*the power of the Holy Ghost.*" That is the only way to empower such a life. Under the control of the Spirit of God. That will produce true joy, peace, and hope.

**CONCLUSION** - So, before the stronger brother exercises his liberties in Christ his responsibilities towards his weaker brother are:

- (a) To not despise the weak believer (Rom. 14:2)
- (b) To receive the weak believer, as God has (Rom. 14:3)
- (c) To not put a stumbling block in his way (Rom. 14:13)
- (d) To walk according to love (Rom. 14:15)
- (e) To not grieve or destroy the faith of the weak believer (Rom. 14:15)
- (f) To pursue peace in the body of Christ (Rom. 14:19)
- (g) To edify the weaker brother (Rom. 14:19)
- (h) To not flaunt our liberty before our weak brother (Rom. 14:22)
- (i) To bear patiently his weaknesses nor to please self (Rom. 15:1)

It would be wonderful if our churches and our homes were full of people who lived for each other. Let us leave this passage with the same words of praise to God with the Jewish and Gentile believers of every age. Let us purpose to strive for the unity of the body of Christ in our assembly for the glory of God.

## “A MINISTER OF JESUS CHRIST” (Romans 15:15-24)

In Romans 15:13-14, Paul closed the central message of Romans with a benediction of prayer for his readers. Now, in the final part from 15:15 to 16:27 he adds a personal postscript to this epistle. In the first part of these personal words, it is more autobiographical. The apostle gives a privileged insight into his heart and the principles that governed his ministry. We see:

- (1) PAUL'S CALLING (v15-16)
- (2) PAUL'S HUMILITY (v17-19a)
- (3) PAUL'S MESSAGE (v19b)
- (4) PAUL'S VISION (v20-24)

(1) *PAUL'S CALLING (v15-16)* - Paul tells the Romans saints in v14 that he knows that they are aware of many of the truths he has taught them in this epistle. But his purpose is to remind them of these great truths, “*Nevertheless, brethren, I have written the more boldly unto you in some sort, as putting you in mind, because of the grace that is given to me of God*” (v15). One of the great problems Christians face is complacency and forgetfulness. A true pastor must continually remind them of truths such as the brevity of life, dangers of this world, the need to live for others, the dangers of this world etc. This work is never fully done, as all of us are a work in progress. Paul then reminds his readers about his calling by use of a number of expressions.

**GRACE** - Paul's position and authority in writing to them simply stems from the grace of God, “*because of the grace that is given to me of God*” (v15b). In Romans 12:6 he pointed to the fact that grace not only saves us and keeps us, but grace appoints differing gifts to serve in the body of Christ, “*Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us.*” Paul is not a self-appointed apostle, but one who was called to this office by grace, “*But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by His grace, To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach Him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood*” (Gal. 1:15-16). All of us need to identify the gifts God has graciously bestowed on us and use them. Paul is using his to write this epistle.

**MINISTER OF JESUS CHRIST** - In v16 Paul then gives more detail of his calling. He describes himself as “*the minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles.*” Now Paul often uses two Greek different words *doulos* or *diakonos* to describe his service, which mean slave and menial servant respectively. However, this time he uses the word *leitourgos*, which Paul uses in Hebrews 8:2 to describe the work of the priests in the Jerusalem Temple.

So, Paul is borrowing from the language of the OT priests engaged in sacrificial work to describe his preaching and teaching ministry of “*the gospel of God.*” This he metaphorically pictures like a sacrifice of “*the offering up of the Gentiles.*” Paul's great desire and motivation is to present Gentile believers as an acceptable sacrifice to God. So we are not only to present ourselves unto the Lord (Romans 12:1), but then we are to labour to present others to Him. It is interesting to note that the primary focus of Paul's ministry is not buildings or budgets, but people. For it is people that will follow you on into eternity. We must use our ministry to build people, rather than using people to build our ministry.

The aim of Paul's ministry is not to build his name but to please the Lord by regarding these new disciples as “*acceptable.*” This is because they have been “*sanctified by the Holy Ghost.*” It is not just about numbers for the sake of numbers, but producing disciples that please the Lord. At the end of the day, all our labours have to please God. We do not live to please self. The greatest tribute is to have the reputation of Enoch who “*pleased God*” (Heb. 11:5). Paul was aiming for this also, “*Wherefore we labour, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of Him*” (2 Cor. 5:9).

Every spiritual effort in this church – whether it is Sunday School, YF, YAF, Bible Studies, or the Worship Service should be done as an offering unto the Lord. This desire to please the Lord with a sweet-smelling savour emanating from our collective labours is a beautiful picture. G. Campbell Morgan has this insightful comment,

What a radiant light this sheds on all our evangelistic and pastoral effort! Every soul won by the preaching of the gospel is not only brought into a place of safety and of blessing; he is an offering to God, a gift which gives Him satisfaction, the very offering He is seeking. Every soul carefully and patiently instructed in the things of Christ, and so made conformable to His likeness, is a soul in whom the Father takes pleasure. Thus we labour, not only for the saving of men, but for the satisfying of the heart of God. This is the most powerful motive.

(2) *PAUL'S HUMILITY (v17-19a)* - The Lord had powerfully used the apostle Paul like no other man. He lists three of these:

(i) *SALVATION OF THE GENTILES* – The apostle had been used to open the Gentile world to the gospel. He preached to them by word, deed, and his character, “*to make the Gentiles obedient, by word and deed*” (18b).

(ii) *MIGHTY SIGNS AND WONDERS* – God had bestowed on him tremendous apostolic sign gifts, “*Through mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God.*” (v19a) These included: Elymas the sorcerer struck with blindness (Acts 13:6-12); healing of a cripple (Acts 14:8-10); casting out a demon in a woman (Acts 16:16-18); and a miraculous removal from a prison in Phillipi (Acts 16:25).

(iii) *MISSIONARY JOURNEYS COMPLETED* – Paul tells us he journeyed “*from Jerusalem, and round about unto Illyricum, I have fully preached the gospel of Christ*” (v19b). This was a journey of around 1400 miles. This was an unprecedented evangelistic endeavour and move of God. We can only put imagine the discomfort of this work through countless sufferings and imprisonments.

We must also consider that Paul had a brilliant mind and intellect. Just read his epistles and especially Romans! God used that great natural ability to write much of the NT. Now, if we had accomplished even 1 out of these 3 things, I dare say we would be very proud of our achievements. All too often we want to keep at least part of the glory for ourselves. Kent Hughes gives an interesting analogy,

“Paul preached the entire 1,400 miles from Jerusalem to Illyricum, which is in present-day Yugoslavia. Not bad—especially in sandals! But Paul takes no credit. Christ did it through him. How contrary this is to the way things usually happen. More often we are like the Little Leaguer who put all his sixty pounds into a ferocious swing and barely connected. The ball scraped by the bottom of the bat, jiggled straight back to the pitcher, who groped and fumbled it. There was still plenty of time to nail the batter at first, but the pitcher’s throw soared high over the first baseman’s head. The slugger flew on toward second base. Somebody retrieved the ball. The next throw sailed wildly into left field. The hitter swaggered into third, puffing along with a man-sized grin, then continued on to cross home plate. “Oh, boy,” he said, “that’s the first home run I ever hit in my whole life!” That is so like us! We step to the plate for Jesus, barely tip the ball, but He arranges for us to get home—and we take all the credit!”

Despite these amazing accomplishments for the kingdom of God, Paul does not glory in self. He points out that, “*I may glory through Jesus Christ in those things which pertain to God*” (v17), as he knew that it was all by, “*by the power of the Spirit of God*” (v19). Writing to the Corinthians, he notes, “*He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord*” (1 Cor. 1:31). Yes, it was Paul’s “*word and deed*” to reach the converts, but Paul knew it was Christ doing this through him to convict and convert the hearts of

the Gentiles. That is the secret of a truly effective life. Paul was not always like this. Before he was converted, he had great confidence in his natural abilities and achievements (Philp. 3:4-6). However, he has no confidence in these things now – just Christ’s glory is all he lives for (Philp. 3:7-8).

Paul knew that the reason he was able to achieve all of these things in the ministry was because of the power of God. So how could he take any of the credit? This principle that governed Paul’s life is something we all need to learn. The greatness of your ministry will be to the degree that you learn this. Without Christ, your whole labours are all just wood, hay and stubble!

(3) *PAUL’S MESSAGE (v19b)* - Paul tells his readers in v16 that he is ministering the “*the gospel of God*” and in v19b he is preaching, “*the gospel of Christ.*” The great theme of the Bible is salvation and the great subject of the Bible is Jesus Christ. That is the message Paul preached over the Empire. His object was not to preach about himself or make his name great, but as he reminded the Corinthians, “*For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake*” (2 Cor. 4:5). Likewise, we are not here to exalt any man or movement, but Jesus Christ the Saviour.

The message of the gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be improved on. He is the most compelling subject in the world. So His glory must be the focus of our singing, prayers, and preaching. “We preach always Him,” said Martin Luther; “this may seem a limited and monotonous subject, likely to be soon exhausted, but we are never at the end of it.” We are not to chase the latest fads and gimmicks but continue to preach the old message of salvation from the old book. Oh yes, there are people who can preach the gospel better than I can, but no one can preach a better gospel! May God always keep this church with that focus so that we can testify with Paul, “*But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world*” (Gal. 6:14).

(4) *PAUL’S VISION (v20-24)* - In this final section, the apostle gives us a wonderful insight into the vision he had for his ministry. His one ambition was to reach the unreached and church the unchurched. In v20 he tells us, “*Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man’s foundation.*” However, Paul wanted his readers to know that his ambitions and plans were not the delusions of some maverick worker. He proves his heartbeat is tied to the beating heart of the Lord to reach the Gentiles in v21 by citing Isaiah 52:15, “*But as it is written, To whom He was not spoken of, they shall see: and they that have not heard shall understand.*”

In v22 Paul makes an important counterbalance to the statement of desire in v20-21. He makes it clear that although it is not wrong for him to have plans, he recognizes in his plans the overruling hand of providence, “*For which cause also I have been much hindered from coming to you.*” Yes, Paul had a “*great desire*” (v23) to come to Rome and then from there to Spain (v24), but he knows that God is in control. It is not wrong for us to make plans every year for the next twelve months as we desire God to move in our church, but we must always allow God to intervene and shut the door. Eventually the Lord would allow Paul to go to Rome, but not the way he had envisaged here in this chapter. Acts 28 shows Paul was not embittered but fully content to serve fervently in that unexpected circumstance. He knew and believed “*As for God, His way is perfect*” (Psa. 18:30).

The apostle Paul had a sanctified “discontented contentment” as he was contented in the sovereign will of God for his life but always desired to see the work of God advance further. As a church we should desire to reach more people with the gospel, but we must never run ahead of God. It is Christ who builds the church – not us. Our duty is to take care of the depth of the ministry and let Him take care of the breadth of it. Now, we may not know the degree of the breadth of this work.

We should not imagine that this was some exotic adventure that Paul went on. This was a life of daily self-denial and suffering. Just read 2 Corinthians 11 for a summary of the hardship he endured. Yet, despite these manifold sufferings, which would have broken the spirit of most

preachers, this man wanted to press on further. He openly declared that he still desired to go on to Rome and from there on to Spain in the West. This was the wilder part of the Empire where the influence of the Romans was not so powerful. We have to marvel. What a man! What a heart! What a worker! This man would travel, through great hardship, at least 4,000 miles by foot just to reach another soul with the gospel. It makes us ashamed as we compare ourselves with this man. We are a million miles from him. Many cannot even make it to church on Sunday, let alone to the prayer meeting! The same passion drove men of God in the past. The founder of the China Inland Mission, James Hudson Taylor used to exclaim, "If I had 1,000 lives, I'd give them all for China."

Finally we must note in v24b the love of Paul for the saints of God. He longed to be at Rome not to see the great architecture or converse with the great and the good of the Empire. No, he simply longed to have sweet fellowship with the humblest of God's saints and to "*be somewhat filled with your company.*" What a man! What a Saviour! It was all down to the grace of God working in and through this man's life.

*CONCLUSION* - We need a revival of the passion that puts Jesus Christ first in all of our lives. Paul gave his motto in Philippians 1:21 as "*for me to live is Christ and to die is gain.*" That is really a perfect definition of a believer – living for Christ. The world's motto is reversed. It is "for me to live is self and to die is the greatest loss." As we leave this section, let us note in summary the principles that governed this extraordinary man's life:

- (a) Paul saw his life as a calling and his work as a sacrificial service (v15-16)
- (b) Paul recognized that any good in his ministry was because of God's grace and power (v15, 19) - we do not do great things for God – He does great things through us!
- (c) Paul only gloried in Christ working through him (v17)
- (d) Paul preached everywhere the gospel of Christ (v19b)
- (e) Paul had a continual passion to reach the unreached with the gospel (v20). His heart beat with the heart of God for souls (v21)
- (f) Paul recognized that providence could derail his plans (v22)
- (g) Paul longed to fellowship with God's people (24b)

If you want your life and ministry to count, live by these principles. Spurgeon advised his members, "Paul was insatiable for the glory of God and the prosperity of the church; let us be filled with the same zeal." There is no greater way to live than this. Nothing this world can offer can compare to that. May God help you to do so.

## “MINISTERING TO OTHERS” Romans 15:25-33

Paul ends Romans 15 with a call to engage in two very practical ministries – giving and prayer. These are ministries every believer is called to be involved in today. Not all are called to be missionaries overseas or pastors, but all are called to enter into these two ministries:

- (1) **MINISTRY OF GIVING (v25-29)**
- (2) **MINISTRY OF PRAYER (v30-33)**

Our performance in these two ministries is indicative of our spiritual temperature.

### (1) MINISTRY OF GIVING (v25-29)

The first ministry that Paul deals with here is the ministry of giving. Now, people get defensive and nervous when you talk about giving. Yet the Bible speaks much about giving. It is estimated that one on every ten verses of the Gospels deals with our use of money.

In the context of Romans 15, Paul was writing about a trip he was planning to make to Jerusalem to deliver a love gift he had raised for the poor saints there. This gift was made up of contributions from churches in Macedonia and Achaia (v25-26). The apostle had been asked by the leaders in Jerusalem to try to help the poor there (Gal. 2:9-10).

### REASONS FOR THE LOVEGIFT

Many of the believers in Jerusalem were in abject poverty for a number of reasons:

- (i) The economy in Jerusalem and the surrounding area was one of the poorest in the Empire.
- (ii) There was a famine at that time in Jerusalem (Acts 11)
- (iii) Persecution resulted in the death of breadwinners and also the loss of their material goods (cf. Acts 8). The sending out of missionaries would also have been a burden for them to bear.
- (iv) Many were ostracized by their neighbours and families when they became believers.

The apostle Paul would also have additional reasons for raising funds for the poor at Jerusalem:

- (i) He was responsible for some of this persecution and had made widows and orphans by his actions.
- (ii) He knew this would be a good test of the spiritual heart of the Gentile churches in Macedonia and Achaia.
- (iii) He recognized that the Gentiles owed a great material debt to the Jerusalem church because of the spiritual privileges they had received, *“It hath pleased them verily; and their debtors they are. For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister unto them in carnal things”* (v27). It was the church at Jerusalem that supplied the backbone of the apostolic band, as well as great preachers like Barnabas and Stephen. It was from the church of Jerusalem that believers first went out to take the gospel to the Gentiles in Acts 11. Also, it was from the church at Jerusalem that most of the NT writers came from. So, now this was a perfect opportunity for mission churches to help the mother church in her needs. This is a duty as well as a delight.
- (iv) A final reason is that Paul knew that this love gift would show the respect of the Gentile churches for the Jewish dominated church at Jerusalem. This would hopefully help to breakdown suspicion and hostility that could arise because of the historic prejudice between Jew and Gentile.

**FINANCIAL STATE OF GENTILE CHURCHES** - Now, some of these Gentile churches were probably wealthy such as those at Corinth. But that was not true of the saints in the

Macedonian churches. Paul writes of their impoverished state (2 Cor. 8:1-5). Paul uses this church as a model and gives us the key in v5 to their abundant generosity, “*first gave their own selves to the Lord*” and then because of that they were able to give “*unto us by the will of God.*” The motivation that should stimulate such abundant liberality is none other than the Head of the Church, “*For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.*” (2 Cor. 8:9) Now, none was richer than Christ and none became poorer. None was more glorified in heaven than Christ and none endured a greater humiliation. Even if the wealthiest man on the planet was to give all his wealth away and then live in abject poverty in slums helping others, this would not even come close to a comparison to what Christ did. Now every believer is called to walk in the footsteps of Christ. As JC Ryle put it, “A giving Saviour ought to have giving disciples.”

Now, the apostle Paul lived this life for the sake of others. This man never preached what he did not practice. He gives a summary of this in 2 Corinthians 6:10, “*As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.*” We get an insight into how this worked in practice at Ephesus (Acts 20:33-35). Paul used the words and example of Jesus Christ to motivate and guide his life of self-denial. When a person has the love of Christ flowing through them they cannot but give to others. Mary Slessor (1848 - 1915) was a late nineteenth century missionary to Africa. She once observed, “you can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving.”

**GIVING AS WORSHIP** - In Romans 15:27 the apostle writes, “*For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister unto them in carnal things.*” This word, “*minister*” is the same Greek word that is used in v16. It has the idea of the sacrificial service of the OT priests. When you give “*carnal things*” or material things to others in need in the body of Christ, we are really worshipping God with your gift. This is especially so when a person or organization has been a spiritual benefit to you (cf. Gal. 6:6).

Paul gives another metaphorical picture of giving as like OT worship in another of his epistles. He describes a love gift sent to him by the Philippian believers as, “*an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God*” (Philp. 4:18b). In this passage, Paul then points out that God will bless those who have done this, “*But my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus*” (Philp. 4:19). Too many don't trust God on this. They look at the Lord and try to barter, “you go first and bless me and then I will give.” But the truth is that God did go first in giving the ultimate Gift – Jesus Christ. Remember, God watches carefully your giving and takes note of it.

God will bless them who trust Him on this. Giving is one of the few areas that God calls us to test Him on. The Lord spoke on tithing, “*Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it*” (Mal. 3:10). Christ promised in the NT, “*Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again*” (Luke 6:38 cf. Prov. 19:17). This giving to us by God may be in many different ways. We think often that giving must always be expressed in material things. Now, God could bless you materially for your giving. But He could bless you by the joy of the Lord in you soul, by salvation in your family, by using your testimony to reach others, by blessing you in the workplace or the school etc. A beautiful illustration of this sacrificial giving to others is Boaz in the OT. From the moment, he met Ruth in his field he sought to unconditionally be a blessing to her. He promised her freedom to glean, ensured she got enough and was protected, and even took care of her daily nourishment needs from his own pocket. God truly honoured and blessed that man. He received the blessing of God in the form of a wonderful wife and the greatest blessing was that he had the honour of being in the lineage of King David and then the Messiah.

## (2) MINISTRY OF PRAYER (v30-33)

Paul ends this chapter by touching on another vital ministry – the ministry of prayer. These two ministries of giving and prayer are the two that we fail most in; especially prayer. The prayer meeting is fundamental to the life of a church. Sadly, it is usually the lowest attended meeting in any local church. Our church is no exception. Ironically, the NT church began from a mighty prayer meeting.

Attendance at the place of corporate and private prayer says a great deal about a person's spiritual health. The devil gives all kinds of excuses for people to avoid prayer. Daniel was an incredibly busy man. He was the second most powerful ruler in the Persian Empire, yet 3 times a day he set aside his work to pray. Sadly, few professing Christians today who claim to know God are interested in communing with Him. In essence, they seem to have no real faith in the power and glory of prayer.

Paul does not shy away from the struggle of the flesh to resist prayer. He accepts that his readers have to “*strive together with me in your prayers.*” This word “*strive*” is an athletic metaphor meaning to struggle or to fight together. Sometimes it is translated “*wrestling together.*” He is conveying the idea that we must strive with the whole man in fervent prayer. Real prayer is not entertainment but an agony of soul. You have to fight against the world, flesh and the devil in order to pray. Satan especially fears a Christian who prays effectual prayers (cf. James 5:16).

Paul then pleads for personal prayer, “*Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me*” (v30). He seeks to motivate them to pray not out of mere duty but, “*for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit.*” The request for personal prayer is characteristic of many of Paul's writings (cf. 1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1; Heb. 13:18). This is because he knew he was weak and recognized that he needed God's power. That realisation of God-dependence is why his legacy has lasted for two thousand years. We need to be constantly praying for one another in this church, especially the leaders. There are no strong Christians here – just a strong God.

Paul not only asks for personal prayer but he requests it for a purpose. Clearly, he was a man who believed in the power of prayer to open doors and move the hearts of even unbelievers. It should be noted that he suggests no Plan B. Prayer was the only thing he knew that works. The apostle candidly gives 4 reasons for prayer:

(i) **DELIVERANCE** – Paul firstly asks that they pray for deliverance, “*That I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judaea*” (v31a). He knew that there was a real threat against his life in Jerusalem. The Spirit prophesied that trouble awaited him there (cf. Acts 20:23; 2 Thess. 2:15-16). Subsequent events proved the reality of this, as his presence provoked a riot in Acts 21. This makes us appreciate more the heart of this man in wanting to go there to relieve the needs of his fellow Jewish believers.

(ii) **UNITY** – Paul then requests that they pray his visit to Jerusalem will be well received by the brethren there, “*that my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted of the saints*” (v31b). He knew that there was suspicion of him there for his outreach to the Gentile people. Indeed, when Paul later went to Jerusalem, the leaders there brought up rumours that were flying around about him when he went there (Acts 21:21).

(iii) **JOURNEYING MERCIES** – Paul was planning to embark on another long and dangerous journey on his way to Rome. So he asks for prayer for this arduous trip, “*That I may come unto you with joy by the will of God*” (v32a). We must advance in the work of God by prayer. Hudson Taylor once advised two missionaries going to a volatile part of China, “*Go forward on your knees.*”

(iv) **SWEET FELLOWSHIP** – The final request Paul had was that when he eventually arrived in Rome that he would have a blessed fellowship with them, “*and may with you be refreshed*” (v32b). The apostle knew that there were Judaizers going around the churches slandering and harassing him and he did not want this to happen in Rome.

It is interesting to note that God answered all of these prayer requests. Prayer always works! Paul was delivered from death from those trying to kill him at Jerusalem. The church there accepted his love gift. Eventually we learn in Acts 28 that God brought him safely to Rome and that the saints of Rome welcomed him.

Although God answered Paul's four prayer requests, He did not answer them the way Paul anticipated. Nor did He answer them at the same moment in time. There were a number of years between each of the answers. Believers must always expect the unexpected with God. In the case of Paul we can see these answers:

- (i) Paul was delivered from the Jews in Rome but only after he had to endure a riot. He was then imprisoned as a consequence for a number of years.
- (ii) Paul was received by the church in Acts 21 but still had to answer untruthful allegations made against him. He also had to shave his head and take a vow to demonstrate that he had not forsaken his Jewish heritage.
- (iii) Paul did make it to Rome safely but not via a long missionary journey. He went there through imprisonments and shipwrecks. It was anything but a smooth journey.
- (iv) Paul was received by the saints at Rome, but not as a travelling apostle but a prisoner under appeal to the Emperor. These believers did not first meet him in the city but God moved on their hearts to journey 40 miles out of the city to receive the beloved apostle. This refreshment was grace from the Lord, as we read it lifted Paul's heart, "*And from thence, when the brethren heard of us, they came to meet us as far as Appii forum, and The three taverns: whom when Paul saw, he thanked God, and took courage*" (Acts 28:15). What a testimony of love this must have been to the other prisoners and the cynical Roman guards.

Remember, as you pray for various needs that a sovereign God knows best how to answer our prayers. Sometimes our considered plans are changed completely by events we could not have foreseen. God knows what He is doing; even if He does not share it with us. We need to walk by faith like Job and simply confess, "*But He knoweth the way that I take: when He hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold*" (Job 23:10). Let me suggest a number of reasons why God answered Paul's prayer requests this way:

- (i) This allowed Paul to encourage us as an example of suffering well.
- (ii) This allowed Paul to write the prison epistles, which would guide the church for most of the last 2,000 years.
- (iii) This encouraged others to rise up and preach the gospel (cf. Philp. 1:14)
- (iv) This allowed Paul to reach many with the gospel that he would not likely have been able to if he was free such as Agrippa, Festus, Felix etc. It may explain how Caesar's household hear the gospel (cf. Philp. 4:23)

*CONCLUSION* - Paul concludes his remarks with a prayer of benediction, "*Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen*" (v33). Paul may not always be with them, but the Lord always was. That was all they ultimately needed. Although Paul does not know the future, he can leave them safely in the Lord's hands. The call of Paul in this section resonates in our hearts today. We are called to be fully involved in the ministry of giving and praying. How involved are you? Do you value intercessory prayers as the apostle Paul? This same kind of praying is needed today! If we will pray like this, you will see God work in ways you have never imagined.