

Empowered Servants

Devotional Reading: Philippians 2:1-13
Background Scripture: Romans 15:1-13

Romans 15:1-13

¹ We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.

² Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. ³ For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” ⁴ For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

⁵ May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, ⁶ so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷ Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

⁸ For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed ⁹ and, moreover, that the

Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written:

“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;
I will sing the praises of your name.”

¹⁰ Again, it says,

“Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people.”

¹¹ And again,

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles;
let all the peoples extol him.”

¹² And again, Isaiah says,

“The Root of Jesse will spring up,
one who will arise to rule over the nations;
in him the Gentiles will hope.”

¹³ 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.

Key Text

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

—Romans 15:5-6

Hope in the Lord

Unit I: Experiencing Hope

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify who set the ultimate example of acceptance.
2. Contrast the Christian concept of empowerment with secular concepts of that term.
3. Suggest a way to react to a common failing of new Christians (“the weak”).

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Diversity? Unity?
- B. Lesson Context: The Big Picture
- C. Lesson Context: The Letter Itself

I. What to Do, Part 1 (Romans 15:1-4)

- A. Bear Burdens (v. 1)
Reciprocal Weakness—and Strength
- B. Please Neighbors (v. 2)
- C. Follow Example (v. 3)
- D. Have Hope (v. 4)

II. What to Do, Part 2 (Romans 15:5-12)

- A. Be Unified in Mind (vv. 5-7)
Unity in Volume
- B. Embrace Diversity for God (vv. 8-12)

III. How God Can Help (Romans 5:13)

- A. Nature of the Kingdom (v. 13a)
- B. Power of the Spirit (v. 13b)

Conclusion

- A. Doctrinal? Practical?
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Diversity? Unity?

Which is better for a country or community: to promote diversity or unity? Actually, that’s a trick question because it presents those two options as being mutually exclusive, as if those were the only choices. Another choice would be to promote “diversity that embraces unity.” A fourth choice might be “unity that honors diversity.” You can probably think of other options as well.

The tension between the concepts of diversity and unity confronted the apostle Paul continually as he traveled throughout the Mediterranean world on his missionary journeys. The primary tension within the churches he planted was how those Christians of Jewish background were to relate to those of Gentile background. The text for today’s lesson adds another tension to the mix.

B. Lesson Context: The Big Picture

The apostle Paul probably wrote his letter to the Romans while in the city of Corinth during his third missionary journey. That would have been about AD 58. Paul had not yet visited the church in Rome; others had planted it many years before.

The nature of the church in Rome was influenced by an edict issued by Emperor Claudius in about AD 49 that forced Jews living in the city to leave (Acts 18:2). This experience probably fostered a certain division within the Roman church between believers of Gentile and Jewish backgrounds. We can imagine each group contending that it had a better claim on salvation in Christ than the other (compare Romans 11:13-24).

The expulsion of Jews from Rome resulted in Christians of Gentile background being in the majority in the church there, if they had not been the majority already (Romans 1:5, 6, 13). Their majority status seems to have continued even after the death of Claudius in AD 54, which allowed Jews to return to the imperial city (compare Acts 18:2 with Romans 16:3-5a).

C. Lesson Context: The Letter Itself

Douglas J. Moo, scholar on the book of Romans, analyzes the structure of the book this way:

- I. The Letter Opening (1:1-17)
- II. The Heart of the Gospel (1:18–4:25)
- III. The Assurance Provided by the Gospel
(5:1–8:39)
- IV. The Defense of the Gospel (9:1–11:36)
- V. The Transforming Power of the Gospel
(12:1–15:13)
- VI. The Letter Closing (15:14–16:27)

This outline challenges us to consider how today’s lesson from chapter 15 fits into the letter to the Romans. As we take up this challenge, we do well to resist the common practice of seeing everything in Romans through the lens of a favored doctrine or doctrinal category. More valuable is to recognize what Moo calls the “logical movement in the letter,” as each topic introduced builds on, clarifies, and/or implements those previously discussed.

I. What to Do, Part 1

(Romans 15:1-4)

A. Bear Burdens (v. 1)

1. We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.

The fact that chapter 15 occurs almost at the end of the letter doesn’t mean it’s an afterthought or a “P.S.” In fact, it’s quite the opposite. Paul thinks the attitude of the *strong* toward *the weak* in this verse is so important that it’s a variation of what he has already said in Romans 14:1: “Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters.” And he will repeat this theme in 15:7, below.

Note the all-encompassing nature of this imperative: the two groups of strong and weak means that it applies to everyone. So far in this letter, there have been three issues dividing these two groups: what kinds of food can be eaten (Romans 14:2), the value of certain days (14:5), and the use of wine (14:21; see 14:17).

These don’t seem to be random examples of how to get along with fellow Christians; rather, it’s much more likely that these were actual problems in the church in Rome. What needed to be addressed was the basis for these points of tension.

Who were the “strong” and the “weak”? And what made them that way? There is no shortage of opinions on these questions! But the most likely explanation is that the weak were Christians of Jewish background who maintained their devotion to the Law of Moses. The strong, therefore, would be primarily those Christians of Gentile background. We say “primarily” because Christians of Jewish background who realized they had been freed from that law could be numbered among the strong. Paul was one such, as the opening *we* of this verse establishes.

Note that Paul is not talking about merely tolerating those who are weak in the faith. Rather, the strong ought to *bear* the infirmities of those weaker in the faith. The nature of this verb is seen in Galatians 6:2, a passage about carrying one another’s burdens (compare Isaiah 53:4; 1 Corinthians 10:24). Our stance toward others is active, not passive, pursuing unity in positive support, not just coexistence through benign neglect.

Reciprocal Weakness—and Strength

Opening jars with tight lids is a task that I do with a fair amount of regularity at home. There are times when my wife cannot open a jar, and she needs my help. But there is something that we all need to remember: those who are weaker than us may be stronger in other areas.

Today’s passage wasn’t talking about physical strength, but issues of conscience. Those who had more understanding knew that eating or abstaining from certain food wasn’t what made a person faithful. Our challenge, whether stronger or weaker, is to build up each other so that all of us will please God in the Christian life. By helping one another, we accomplish the goal.

—C. S.

B. Please Neighbors (v. 2)

2. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up.

The phrase *please our neighbors* here is the flip side of the imperative “not to please ourselves” in the previous verse. Elsewhere Paul condemns the idea of pleasing ourselves rather than God

(Galatians 1:10; 1 Thessalonians 2:4). But the idea here is that of pleasing a fellow believer rather than ourselves. Living that way will build the faith of one's fellow Christians (Romans 14:15, 20).

Before moving on, we should note that the word *neighbors* in this context refers to fellow believers. It echoes the command of Leviticus 19:18 to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. If God's love compels love for all around us, how much more does it compel love for our sisters and brothers in Christ!

C. Follow Example (v. 3)

3. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."

Paul moves directly from the exhortation of the previous two verses to the example of *Christ* (compare 1 Corinthians 10:33–11:1). The quote from Psalm 69:9b illustrates this further. The psalmist, recounting the way the righteous are often blamed for the sins of the wicked, anticipated the work of Christ, who took the guilt of sinful humanity on himself on the cross. Christ's sacrifice is the supreme expression of God's love that overcomes divisions and boundaries.

What Do You Think?

How should Christians respond to being insulted?

Digging Deeper

What biblical examples inform your answer?

D. Have Hope (v. 4)

4. For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

If anyone asks you what value there is in studying the Old Testament now that we're in the New Testament era, the answer is in this verse. But we should not view this verse in isolation in that regard since Paul writes it immediately after quoting from the Old Testament.

Another passage that affirms this value is 1 Corinthians 10:11. As we note the Old Testament's limitations for application to today (see Romans 6:14-15; 7:4), we do not throw the baby out with the bathwater by ignoring it altogether.

There is a process between our learning from *the Scriptures* and the *hope* that ultimately results. That process involves (at least) the two intermediate effects of *endurance and encouragement*. Through the Scripture, God works to give patience and endurance to Christians.

II. What to Do, Part 2

(Romans 15:5-12)

A. Be Unified in Mind (vv. 5-7)

5. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had,

If the church is to be unified in its diversity and diverse in its unity, it will only be so because of the good news of Jesus and the work of God the Father. God is characterized by *endurance*, his capacity to bear with the failures and rebellions of humanity while continuing to offer them forgiveness. God is characterized by *encouragement*, his constant provision of the tangible and intangible resources his people need as they navigate life's challenges. The supreme expression of God's patience and consolation is in Jesus, God's true king, who willingly gave his life for the unworthy.

This is the God who calls his people to pursue unity in their diversity. Paul recognizes that it is not within the flesh's capacity to unite with one another. Thus, this verse requests God to give readers this ability (see John 15:5; Romans 7:18). Because of who God is and what he has done in Christ, his people can remain faithful to him only if they have the same mind and heart, characterized by patience and encouragement for one another. That person may be different from me, but Christ died for that person, so I need to love that person just as God does. That likemindedness goes beyond merely being agreeable. As Paul says in Philippians 2:4, it will mean putting others' interests above our own.

The story of God has always been one of patience and comfort. That story came to its pinnacle in Jesus. Now we continue the story as the church that pursues a shared life filled with patience and consolation fitting our Lord.

6. so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The unified *mind* of God's people leads to unified praise of *God*. Paul gives us an image of a church gathered with members from every imaginable background and identity but with every voice raised in praise to God (compare Acts 2:46-47). But that expression of praise is not simply in corporate worship. It is vividly expressed in the concern for others more than oneself that each Christian demonstrates, the exercise of the unified mind in all the Christian's relationships. To glorify God is to praise God for what he truly is and has truly done. The true God is the *Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*, who died and rose for unworthy humanity. That one is the ruler of all, the one to whom all God's people and ultimately all of humanity will bow. To bow to him as Lord can only mean that we surrender our rights, customs, privileges, and desires to put others first. When we do, God is truly glorified, for in our actions the world sees what God has done.

What Do You Think?

To what degree do you consider Christian unity to be a reality versus an ideal?

Digging Deeper

What role does the Spirit play in unifying Christians? What responsibility does that leave us?

Unity in Volume

The one and only time I have been in a stadium was September 29, 2014. It was Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City, Missouri, the home field of the Kansas City Chiefs professional football team. On the day I was there, the stadium's fans cheered so loudly that they hit 142.4 decibels. That is louder than a jet taking off from an aircraft carrier. There are plenty of times I am unable

to hear one voice, but there is no way I could miss 50,000 united voices!

The unity of Christians' voices in praise of God should be grander still. If the cheers and shouts in a football stadium are impossible to miss, imagine what it would be like if all Christians united to glorify God with one mind and mouth. I wonder how many people would come to recognize Jesus as Lord if Christians were all more of one mind and mouth.

—C. S.

7. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

Paul ends this section with a pointed summary. What should I do with this person who prefers things I do not like, accepts things I reject, and rejects things I accept? The answer is to respond to that person as *Christ* responded to us. Christ did not forgive us because we started pleasing him. No, he forgave us in our sins. In our gratitude we sought to please him, but first, he received us as we are. Of course, he continues to receive us, even in our ongoing failure. That is the supreme model of how *God* calls us to respond to one another.

What Do You Think?

Which biblical teachings inform what it means to accept one another?

Digging Deeper

Which biblical teachings offer guidance about unacceptable behaviors or attitudes and how to react in such situations?

B. Embrace Diversity for God (vv. 8-12)

8. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed

Paul now puts the work of *Christ* in the frame of the major division in the Roman church, between Jewish and Gentile Christians. He affirms that Christ's work fulfilled God's promises to Israel, that Christ was *a servant* of those who received circumcision as a sign of God's covenant and promise. The God of Israel was never content to be just

the God of one tribe. He always pointed forward to the peoples of the world joining with that tribe to be God's people. The story of the Old Testament is peppered with God's repeated promises to make himself known to the nations of the world through Israel. God fulfilled those promises in Jesus, the true Israelite (compare Genesis 22:18; Galatians 3:15-16).

9. and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written: "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name."

Paul now cites several passages from Israel's sacred Scriptures. This reminds readers that God always intended his people to be diverse and inclusive. Furthermore, this section connects to Paul's earlier comment (see verse 4). Paul's ministry was built around this divine intention. To believers in Jesus of different backgrounds, he repeatedly taught that Christ's church must express the promise of God to redeem all people as the church expresses love across lines of ethnicity, class, and custom.

Quoted here is David's song of praise in 2 Samuel 22:50, repeated in Psalm 18:49. Paul drew a lesson for the Roman church from the history of David, inviting defeated Gentile nations to praise God with Israel. This would have resonated with the original audience because of their reverence both for David and the Scripture.

10. Again, it says, "Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people."

This quotation comes from Deuteronomy 32:43, as rendered in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (see also Psalm 18:49). Again, the picture is of former pagans who have joined with God's people in worship of the true God. God has always sought diverse people to worship him in unity. The picture is not of *Gentiles* becoming Israelites to join God's *people* but of Gentiles joining Israelites to praise God as his diverse people.

11. And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all the peoples extol him."

The third quotation comes from Psalm 117:1. This very short psalm, merely two verses long, calls on people from all the world's ethnicities and tribes to join in God's praise. It is little won-

der that so short a song of praise would focus on the promised diversity of God's people. The God who created the world and its diverse peoples ultimately seeks for all the diverse peoples of the world to worship him together as one.

12. And again, Isaiah says, "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope."

The final quotation comes from the great prophet *Isaiah*. In Isaiah 11:10, the root of Jesse refers prophetically to Jesus, the descendant of David, the son of *Jesse*. Jesus, as that *root*, is the one who fulfills God's promise of David's descendant who will *rule over the nations* without end (2 Samuel 7:12-16; Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15; Luke 1:32). His reign is not tyrannical or incompetent, like many of Israel's kings. People of all nations will trust him as a good, wise, and powerful ruler, just as he demonstrates in making the nations his people despite their rebellion against him. True submission to Jesus as king means that his people must pursue unity in their diversity just as he pursues it.

What Do You Think?

What other passages give you confidence in God's faithfulness and power to accomplish what he promises?

Digging Deeper

How can you align your own commitments with God's purposes?

III. How God Can Help

(Romans 15:13)

A. Nature of the Kingdom (v. 13a)

13a. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him,

God's *peace* is not merely the absence of hostility. Rather, it is positive, active goodwill toward others, living in active harmony and active service for one another. Likewise, God's *joy* is more than a pleasant state of mind. In joy, we respond to the experience of God's love, as we receive it from God and as we receive it through one another. The peace and joy will be in each of them and

shared among them as they express Christ's reign by living in harmony, deferring to one another in love (compare Romans 5:1; 14:17).

B. Power of the Spirit (v. 13b)

13b. so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The prayer continues, asking for abundant hope and a positive view of the future based on the believer's confidence in God's goodness and power. The hope of the future is grounded in the experience of the present. The *Holy Spirit* living in the Christian provides the proof of God's commitment to his people, assuring us that he will complete at Christ's return the salvation he began at our conversion (Romans 5:5; 8:11; Philippians 1:25). God's hope is not mere optimism. It is grounded in what God has done and is doing, expressing confidence in what God promises yet to do.

Hope binds God's people together in the present. By Christian hope, we affirm that we will spend eternity together in the fullness of Christ's kingdom. If we will be unified in eternity, pursuing unity in the present is our only faithful, hopeful alternative.

What Do You Think?

Where do you see the Spirit at work to shape your perspectives and actions?

Digging Deeper

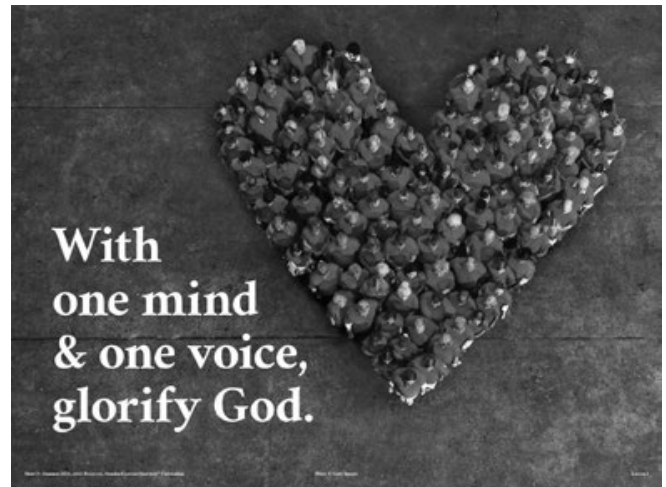
In what specific ways can you cultivate an attitude that encourages you to follow the Spirit's guidance?

Conclusion

A. Doctrinal? Practical?

A teacher of an adult Bible study class announced that when their current study of the book of Mark was concluded, the class would study a certain doctrine. This announcement resulted immediately in an objection from a participant who said that every church she had been part of had had divisions over doctrine. Her objection was along the lines of "Give us something practical, not doctrinal!"

This statement, like the "Unity? Diversity?"



Visual for Lesson 3. Display this visual as you discuss the questions associated with verse 6. Ask for Bible verses that support learners' answers.

question we posed at the very beginning of this lesson, is a false choice. Doctrine (what we believe) is the basis of practice (how we behave; compare 1 Timothy 1:3-10; 4:16; 2 Timothy 4:3-5; Titus 1:9; 2:1-14).

The doctrine of the church's global, multinational, multiethnic, inclusive, and diverse membership is grounded in the even more foundational doctrines of creation and redemption. God created all people of every nation, and Christ died and rose for all people of every nation. Those doctrinal foundations leave us with a practical question: Are we willing to surrender our privilege and defer to those unlike us to express our faith in and submit to the Creator God and the crucified Christ?

B. Prayer

Dear God, we celebrate your love that made us one body of Christ composed of many tribes and nations. Empower us to live according to your plan for your kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Christ creates one church united in him.

How to Say It

circumcision	sur-kuhm-si-zhn.
Gentiles	Jen-tiles.
Isaiah	Eye-zay-uh.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Form learners into research pairs and distribute a newspaper or magazine to each pair. Challenge pairs to find pictures or headlines that show or imply a weak person. *Alternative:* Have pairs do their research using their smartphones.

After five minutes, call for discoveries in whole-class discussion. Pose one or more of the following questions to the class: 1—What was it about the person that indicated “weakness”? 2—How do stronger people react to those in your example? 3—How easy is it to respond positively to those who are weak?

Lead into Bible study by saying, “The apostle Paul has something to say about how Christians should respond to weakness in one another. Let’s see what he had to say.”

Into the Word

Have two volunteers read Romans 15:1-13, alternating with each verse. Then combine the pairs formed earlier into groups of four. Name the groups and distribute to them handouts (you create) with instructions as follows:

Commands and Reasons Group. Provide the group a handout (you create) with *What Paul Commands / Reason to Obey* as the headers of two columns. Instructions: “For each command you find in the text, write it in the first column; then write in the other column a reason why, also from the text. Include verse references.” **Jesus Group.** Instructions: “List everything Romans 15:1-13 says about Jesus.” **Church Group.** Instructions: “List everything Romans 15:1-13 has to say about the church.”

After sufficient time, reconvene for whole-class discussion of findings and conclusions. Here are possible discussion questions: 1—In what ways is the picture of the church as presented here a contrast to the examples we discussed to begin class? 2—Why do you suppose Paul had to remind the

Roman Christians to bear with the weak? 3—Why are Christians sometimes less tolerant of weakness than non-Christians?

Into Life

Write this prompt on the board and ask each learner to jot down a response: “One way I’m a stronger Christian today than I was several years ago is _____.” Inform learners that you will collect the slips and that they should not put their names on them.

After collecting the slips, redistribute them so that no one receives his or her own slip back. Display or distribute the following two discussion questions to the groups of four formed earlier: 1—How well do you identify with the response on the slip you now hold? Why? 2—How can the weaknesses we’ve discussed be turned into strengths?

Allow time for groups to consider their responses before the whole-class sharing that follows. Use these two questions to conclude this discussion: 1—How can bearing with the weak lead them to be stronger? 2—In what ways can we “bear with” their weaknesses?

List the answers on the board as they are suggested.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “I Once Was Weak, but Now I’m Strong” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners complete it individually in a minute or less as indicated before working with a partner to finalize.

After calling time under either alternative, challenge learners to choose one way to “bear with the weak” throughout the week. Begin next week’s lesson by allowing learners time to share what happened.

As learners depart, distribute copies of the “Reasons to Serve, Foundations for Unity” crossword puzzle from the activity page. Close with prayer appropriate to today’s topic.