

# **“THE GOD OF ENDURANCE AND ENCOURAGEMENT.”**

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**First Christian Reformed Church**

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**Scripture Texts: Romans 15:1-7**

## **Introduction.**

Paul is a true pastor. He loves the church. He loves the church in Rome even though he has never been there. He cares about this congregation of saints God has called out of the world into this special and unique fellowship of believers.

There is no place on earth like the gathering of the church of Jesus Christ purchased by His precious blood, filled with His Holy Spirit and gathered around the holy Word of God. This is unparalleled. This is holy ground and it is eternal.

And there is no gathering more under attack by a most powerful enemy. Satan hates the church and never stops trying to disrupt and divide and destroy the precious body of Jesus Christ.

So Paul is urging the members of the church in Rome to resist all the ways Satan tries to destroy our fellowship and unity and harmony. This is a challenge for any church, and especially any church as racially and ethnically diverse as Rome, filled with Gentile and Jewish converts, some who are young in the Lord, weaker, less spiritually mature.

Whenever you mix people together you get differences, and differences mean conflict, differences of opinion, of conviction. What are we supposed to do when there is conflict?

Paul has been piling up argument after argument and reason after reason to love one another.

Because of all the mercies God has shown you. Because God first loved you when you were an unlovable sinner. Because God has already welcomed you and them, so you welcome them. He appeals to the sacrifice Christ has already made for those you are at odds with. He

appeals to the judgment seat of God where we will be judged. He points to the example of Jesus who was strong and bore with us who are weak.

**Vss. 1-2, the call to the strong and weak.**

**Romans 15:1-2** We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. 2 Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.

Notice Paul says, “We who are strong.” He includes himself with the strong and he assumes they know who the strong ones are and who the weak ones are.

But what about today? How do I preach this text to us? Who are strong and who are weak? How about if I ask for a show of hands who thinks they are strong and who thinks they are weak? Or to make it more interesting how about I ask you to point out the weak ones.

If I came up to you and put my arm on your shoulder and said I just want you to know that I am bearing with your weakness. What would you say? How would you respond?

Once in a while I have encountered a brother who will say “I am feeling weak in the face of some sin, would you pray for me.” And that is a beautiful thing, I love coming along side that kind of honesty and humility. We all need a friend like that.

Nowadays nobody admits they are weak. In our culture we aren’t supposed to make distinctions, don’t talk about weaknesses as weaknesses. No one is handicapped or disabled, they are differently abled. We can’t talk about gifted children. Everyone is to be mainstreamed.

Paul shows us not only are the distinctions real, they are also God’s doing. God has bestowed on some greater gifts and abilities for the purpose of building up and lifting up, to support the weak and keep them from falling.

What should strength be used for? To beat up or tear down the weak? To push them around or push them away? We are not given the gift of

strength to use for ourselves and against others. We are given strength to help others, to build others up, to please and benefit others.

Every week I see Grace Hayes head out the front door with her walker, and Damion Hayes races out to help his grandmother Grace Hayes down the front steps. It is a beautiful picture of the strong helping the weak and the weak accepting the help. In some ways Grace is pretty strong, getting around pretty well at 96. If I have to live to 96 I hope I am as strong and as of sound a mind and quick a wit as she is.

Why are some strong and some weak, some wise and some not so wise, some rich and some poor, some with much and some with little? There is a tendency for those who have to look down on or judge those who have not, and to regard what they have as theirs, for their own use.

The stronger we are the more God expects us to support the weak. We are not given by God what we are and have to be used just for ourselves and our pleasure, showing no concern for others. The rich are obligated to help the poor, the strong to help the weak, the educated the uneducated, the experienced the inexperienced, the older the younger. The gifted child should help the not gifted child. We are to use our strengths to serve others, not be superior over them.

*Bear* with implies that this isn't easy, it may involve some sacrifice, some self-surrender, letting go of some of your own privileges, not pleasing ourselves in order to please others.

*Think about that phrase, pleasing ourselves.* That is at the root of nearly every conflict at every level of human interaction. From fighting over a toy, to what show to watch, to what to do at the holidays, to how much to spend, to whose turn it is, to who got more, to unmet expectations, all the way up to nations warring to protect their own interests.

Just last week I came home from church a bit late, a bit rushed because we had a Life Group to go to and when I got home dinner wasn't ready. I wasn't pleased and I subtly let it be known. An unmet expectation, a selfish desire, seeking to please myself rather than my wife. Pleasing ourselves breaks down peace, harmony and unity, in marriage, family, church and country. Yes, I later confessed my sin and apologized.

### **Vs. 3, the reason.**

*Why?* The reason Paul gives is like shooting a mosquito with a bazooka. Because Christ did not please Himself. Talk about an understatement. Who can touch that? After Christ condescended to come down to earth and then suffer and die and bear all the sin of humanity, how can I object when Paul says I should not resent some minor inconvenience on my time, energy or money or freedom?

It is embarrassing what I am selfish about compared to what Christ did for me. Why do we get so wrapped around the axle over little stuff, or even big stuff, or being asked to do something or give something up, that is still minor compared Christ's agony on the cross?

Remember Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane on His knees sweating blood, wrestling in prayer. Should He drink the cup, should He please Himself or please us and bear our weaknesses?

We should wake up telling ourselves remember the cross, and then go through the day saying, remember the cross. Remember you will never be asked to do as much or more than what Christ willingly did for you. You will never be put out or inconvenienced the way Christ was.

He surrendered Himself and sacrificed Himself for us. He laid aside His own pleasure for our pleasure. He forgot about Himself in order to bring glory to God.

This is just the practical working out of the second commandment to love your neighbor, to love one another, to make allowances for one another, to outdo one another in showing honor and to not think too highly of ourselves.

We are first and foremost to seek to please our "neighbor" (i.e., the weak), our fellow believer. Our first consideration should be their "good," to "bear with" the shortcomings and weaknesses of our weak brothers and sisters. How can we not show love to them, when what is being asked of us is so little in comparison to Christ?

“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

“We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:19-20).

Test yourself and see if there is anyone you don’t love, who annoys you, who is unloving and unkind. Acknowledge to God that you don’t love your enemy, that person you avoid. Then confess your sin, your sin against God for not loving your neighbor. Once you confess your sin and ask for forgiveness, that doesn’t mean loving them will be easy, it just means you are clean.

From that place of cleanness you can start moving toward love that is genuine and not hypocritical. From that position of cleanness you can make the choice and ask God to give you His love He has toward us and toward them, and enable you to love them as He does.

You can apply this at church and at home. Loving the lovely is easy, loving the unlovely is hard. Loving your husband or wife or kids when they are unlovely is hard. Remember the cross. It’s not as hard as that. It is not a feeling or an emotion, it is a choice and an action, the strength for which comes from God.

#### **Vs. 4, the help, the endurance and encouragement of Scripture.**

4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

This is the advantage of knowing the Scriptures, that we might be strengthened to have endurance and encouragement, that we might have hope.

There is nothing in Scripture which cannot help us. It is all useful, profitable, life-giving, hope-filling. The Holy Spirit of God inspired all of this, it is all of an advantage to you.

If you want to have hope, immerse yourself in the inspired Word of God. Consider the opposite. If we don't know the Scriptures we are without hope.

I have been rebuked by this text. I have failed you as your pastor. I have not urged you to memorize Scripture. Every month for 18 years I have had the office print out a verse on a card and put it in your box, but I have failed by neglecting to urge you to memorize it, to put it in your heart and put it in your children's hearts and memorize it at home.

Over 200 verses we would have memorized. This verse in Romans 15:4 is our memory verse for this month. Memorization of Scripture is never wasted time, even verses you think you have forgotten, God will surprise you and bring it to mind at some most helpful moment years later.

I love the honesty of the writer of Hebrews when he says it is written somewhere ...(Heb. 2:6). How is it Paul could quote Psalm 69:9? Paul knew the Scriptures. He is pointing us to our hope.

God gave us the Scriptures so that we might have hope. God has created us in such a way as to be able to draw strength and comfort from examples recorded in Scripture. God is called the God of endurance and encouragement. What He wrote in Scripture He is in the process of writing into us.

We are all weak in knowledge of Scripture, and we are weak in prayer, so Paul prays for us.

### **Vss. 5-6, prayer for living in harmony.**

5 May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Are we striving against each other or striving together with one voice toward the same goal of loving each other and revealing Jesus to the glory of God? There is no glory where there is strife, conflict, discord, division, disharmony.

Who holds the key to the harmony? The strong or the weak?

The strong hold the key to Christian unity. The ultimate responsibility for unity in the church is theirs. The initiative, therefore, rests with those of us who are strong. SS

It is our responsibility to do what we can to promote one another's growth in grace and not to do anything to hinder it. We are all climbing the mountain of holiness together and we need help from each other, even if some of us are more competent than others.

Paul recognizes this will only be accomplished by God's power, so he prays. We must pray to become this kind of person, this kind of husband, wife, parent, child, Christian. Pray this prayer.

As we are weak in hope because we are weak in knowing Scripture so we are all weak in prayer.

I urge you to come this evening to our special prayer service for the election of officers, one of the most important things we do as a church. Why would we not be here for something so important? I urge our council and our nominees to be here to pray, to seek the living God in such harmony that with one voice and heart we would glorify God by calling on His name together.

We are all weak in this, we can all help each other in our weakness by building each other up in prayer and unity of fellowship.

### **Vs. 7, Welcome.**

We are called to love each other, to cherish each other, to value and commend each other. To do nothing to bring separation. What God has joined together, let no one put asunder.

Has Christ welcomed you? Has God in Christ welcomed he who is weak and he who is strong? Paul calls us, whether strong or weak, to welcome one another in the same manner as Jesus has welcomed us. He welcomes us with our defects, our misunderstandings, our weak grasp of his truth, our stubborn hearts and hard heads.

I hope and pray in all we say and do here at First CRC, that our highest goal, our greatest aim is the glory of God and that that will be evident in how we treat each other, accept each other, love each other, over and above and in spite of our differences.

### **Implications and application.**

This is counter cultural. Dying to our rights, liberties, and selves *cuts against almost every impulse of our age*, may we learn instead, in Christ, to “welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Romans 15:7).

*First*, we remember what Christ has done for us, remember the cross.

*Second*, we take God’s Word to heart and make it the solid foundation for our endurance and encouragement and hope.

*Third*, we pray with Paul that the God of endurance and encouragement give us what we need to live together in harmony and unity and peace, to not please ourselves only but others.

### **Prayer:**

Father, help us to use our strengths and weaknesses to build up each other and the church.