

Paul's Letter to The Romans



The Best Example Ever... Romans 15:1-6

^{ESV} **Romans 15:1**...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. ³ For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." 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. 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.

Jesus is the best example there ever was.

But few years back, especially in the sixties and seventies, it became pretty rare for conservative Christians to ever talk of Jesus as any sort of example to follow.¹

Now there was a reason for that. The reason was that liberal theologians and pastors had begun to speak of Jesus, no longer in terms of the great historical and theological propositions of the past, but only in terms of his providing an example for Christians to follow. On the one hand the liberals denied most of the great theological affirmations about Jesus. On the other hand, they heartily recommended him as a wonderful example for people to emulate, as if they could.

Now I want you to think about that.

On the one hand they denied his deity.

They denied his miracles and sayings.

They denied his sinlessness.

They denied his resurrection.

They even denied his historicity.

Still they thought he was a worthy example, worthy of our study and emulation.

They thought he was a worthy example, like Ben Franklin or Abe Lincoln.

As a result, many liberal pastors and theologians of the sixties found themselves conflicted. They denied most of the orthodox theological propositions about Jesus. They denied the biblical and historical account of Jesus. Still they liked Jesus very much, or at least they liked the Jesus they imagined very much, and that internal conflict led them to say some fairly stupid things. They said things like, **“Well, of course, he was not really divine you know. The deity of Jesus was an invention of the early church. Still, He is a wonderful example for us to follow.”**

Or they said, **“Well, he didn’t really rise from the dead you know. In fact, he was terribly disappointed when his aspirations to usher in the kingdom of God didn’t quite work out the way he planned...and his crucifixion was a terrible waste and didn’t really accomplish any of the things orthodox Christianity says it did. Still, He is a wonderful example for us to follow.”**

And a few of them even said, **“Well Jesus wasn’t really an historical character. His life and his many words and sayings were all inventions springing forth from the community of faith. Still, it has to be said, ‘He is a wonderful example for us to follow.’”**

Now I have to admit. That last idea is hard for me to follow.

It really borders on the irrational. It is hard to see how a non-historical character could ever provide any sort of example to follow. When I read something like that it reminds of C.S. Lewis’ wonderful response to such idiocy in *Mere Christianity*. Listen to what he says:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: **“I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.”** That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must *make* your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.²

But the liberals didn’t pay much attention to Lewis or that kind of clear-headed thinking. Instead, the dumb things they said finally led many conservative theologians and pastors to speak up and say, **“Now that is about enough of that kind of rubbish. Jesus was not an example for us to follow. Jesus was and is the Lord of Glory. He is our Great Redeemer and our Dread and Sovereign Lord and is worthy of our worship and praise and reverence and awe. Stop**

talking to us anymore about his being a great example. He is either a person's Savior or a person's Judge but He is no example."

And you can see I think why good and godly conservative men would respond like that. They responded that way because they were sick and tired of hearing Jesus glory and person diminished or denigrated. You can see why they were irritated, can't you? There is only one small problem.

They were wrong.

They were wrong, even though they meant well. They were wrong because...

Jesus is the best example there ever was.

In fact what we are going to see Paul say in today's study is that we who are strong ought to help bear the weaknesses of our weaker brothers and the reason we ought to do that is because **that is what Jesus did**, that is **what the whole of the Old Testament illustrates** and that is a **wonderful way in which we can bring honor and glory to the Father** of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Did you get that? The reason we ought to help bear the lack of strength possessed by our weaker brothers is because **that it is what Jesus Himself did**, **what the Old Testament teaches in story and verse** and because **it will honor God the Father**.

Still, I am focusing on one aspect of that more than the others. This it is.

Jesus is the best example there ever was.

And if you are a careful and discerning listener you are probably asking, by now,
“Best example of what?”

And Paul’s answer would be, **“Best example of not living for himself but instead living and dying for the benefit of others by bearing what they were unable to bear.”**

Now Paul’s emphasis of that aspect of Jesus wonderful character and work fits very well within the whole framework and argument of Romans 14-15. It fits into the flow of what Paul has been trying to get the Romans to see throughout the whole of Romans 12-16.

You will remember that Paul explained the wonder of God’s saving work in Christ in which declared hell-bound sinners to be justified on the basis of their connection to Christ through faith alone.

You will remember too, I hope, that starting in chapter twelve Paul switched gears and began to speak of how we ought to live in light of God’s tender mercy toward us in Christ and what he said was this, **“It is a logical, intelligently spiritual response for believers to present their bodies as living sacrifices to God based on His having justified them in Christ.”**

But Paul didn’t leave the idea of **“presenting our bodies as living sacrifices”** as some sort of ill-defined or hazy concept. Instead, Paul spelled out what he meant. And what Paul said was this, **“If you want to know how to present your bodies as living sacrifices here’s what you have to do. Stop being conformed to this**

present evil age and to start being transformed by having your minds renewed. Now if you want to know how to do that, here's what you have to do."

- Stop thinking of yourself more highly than you ought and to start viewing yourself properly by understanding your important place in the body of Christ.
- Make every effort to make your love is sincere and not hypocritical.
- Bless those who persecute or treat you harshly.
- Don't seek revenge...leaving justice and vengeance to God.
- Obey the governmental authorities God has ordained.
- Keep in mind the continual debt of love you owe because of what Christ has done.
- Live with other Christians in a forbearing way, not judging Christians who are strong enough in faith to exercise a measure of Christian liberty and by not crushing the life out of those who are weaker by rolling over them in the exercise of your own Christian freedom.

Now what we have been doing the last couple of months is just working ourselves through Paul's list of things and considering the implications of each thing means and how we might set about obeying each command here at Grace Community Presbyterian Church.

And the last three or four weeks we have been focusing particularly on this last command and the whole issue of forbearance. We have talked about how "**weaker brothers**"...that is, those with scruples or vulnerabilities to some meat and some drink ought not to judge those who have a measure of liberty with regard to eat and drink. We have also talked about how those that are "**stronger brothers**" ought not to just steamroll over those who are more sensitive about what they eat or drink. And we have even talked about the fact that the principle of forbearance that Paul is discussing extends to a whole lot more than just food

and drink. It extends to every area of life where Christians have a measure of liberty.

Now that is where we have been and today, as I said earlier, we have begun to move into Paul's wrap up of the discussion of forbearance and as he begins to wrap it up he focuses especially on the "**stronger brothers.**" The reason for that I think is because the "**stronger**" by definition are more able to condescend, to forbear than the "**weaker brothers.**" It is not that the "**weaker brothers**" will not forbear; rather it is that they being weak cannot...are not able...to forbear.

That means that the principle responsibility to forbear always lies with the strong. I love what Calvin says:

The stronger then any one is in Christ, the more bound he is to bear with the weak.³

Now having said that all that, let me return to my initial overview of what we are going to see in Romans 15:1-6. What we are going to see is this.

Paul is going to argue that the strong ought to help bear the weaknesses of the weak and the reason they ought to do that is because that it is **what Jesus Himself did, what the Old Testament teaches in story and verse** and because that is **what will honor Father of the Lord Jesus.**

Alright, that is where we have been and where we are. So let's put in at Romans 15:1.

^{ESV} **Romans 15:1**...We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.⁴

Now the first thing you ought to notice is that Paul identifies himself with the strong. What that means is that Paul had the scruples of a Gentile when it came to food and drink.

How remarkable that is. It is extraordinary to me that Paul had come to a place where he could view the foods, he so disdained as a Pharisee, to be **“good gifts from God”** capable not only of sustaining life but of being enjoyed and embraced. Of course, it seems inevitable that he would have had to come to that position sooner or later if he were going to go to the Gentiles and plead with them to repent and believe the gospel. It seems inevitable that that a man embracing a despised people would sooner or later have to embrace their despised food.

Now the second thing you ought to notice is that Paul wants the Romans **“to bear”** with the weaknesses of the **“weaker brothers.”**

Now customarily, **“to bear”** can either mean **“to tolerate...to put up with”** or it can mean something more like **“to help carry...to help support”**.

John Stott writes this:

“The Greek verb here like the English verb ‘bear’, can mean either to ‘endure’ in the sense of ‘tolerate’, or to ‘carry’ and ‘support’. The context suggests that the latter is correct here. One person’s strength can compensate for another person’s weakness.”⁵

You see the idea is not that we are to respond by saying, **“Oh for heaven’s sake, come on.”** The idea is that we are to say, **“Ah, I can see that that is a heavy burden for you. Can I help you bear that burden...so you don’t have to bear it alone?”**

Now I thought you might like to see a couple of passages where the word is used to get a better understanding of Paul means. First look at Acts 3:2.

^{ESV} **Acts 3:2**...And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple.

Do you see how it is used? The crippled man was carried to his place of begging because he was unable to get there himself. He was **“borne along”** in his weakness by others.

And here’s the interesting thing, it’s the exact same word and idea in Matthew 8:17.

^{ESV} **Matthew 8:17**...This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "He took our illnesses and bore our diseases."

Now Matthew’s point is very simple. Jesus bore for others what they could not bear themselves.

In fact, I wish the English Bible, would have connected the words together a little better like they are Greek. You see in Greek, if you want to make a word negative you simply put an alpha or an **“a”** in front of it and it made it the reverse of the

original word. We have a few words like that in English and mostly they have come over to us from other languages. Words like **“theist”** a person who believes in God and **“atheist”** a person who does not. It’s the same with **“Gnostic”** a person who knows and **“agnostic”** a person who does not.

Well the word used here in verse one is δυνατός and it has a wide range of meanings. It can mean **“able, strong, powerful or even capable”**. Anyway the word for **“weak”** here is the exact same Greek word with an alpha in front of it and it means something like **“not able, not strong, not powerful or not even capable.”**

So I think Paul’s point is this, **“We who are able or capable or strong ought to help carry the sensitivities and weaknesses of those who are not able or not capable or not strong.”** You see Paul is calling the Romans and us by extension to not just put up with those who are **“unable”** but the help those who are unable.

We know that is what he meant from the last part of verse one where he says:

^{ESV} **Romans 15:1**...We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.

You see the construction is really easy to understand if you reduce it down to its simplest parts.

We who are able ought...

- **to bear**
- **and not to please**

And, of course, the question is, **“To bear what?”** and **“To not please what?”**

And the answer is **“to bear the weaknesses of those who are not able”** and **“to not please ourselves”**.

Listen to what Calvin says here. I think this is so good.

... nothing slows down or stops acts of kindness more than when any one is too eaten up with himself, so that he has little or no concern for others, but instead follows his own thoughts and feelings.⁶

I also really like J.B. Phillips translation here where he says:

We who have strong faith ought to shoulder the burden of the doubts and qualms of the weak and not just go our own sweet way.⁷

And listen to Calvin one more time.

He teaches us here...that there is no exception in which we ought not to accommodate ourselves to our brethren when we can do so, according to God’s word, to build them up.⁸

Now why should we do that? Why should we accommodate our neighbors and help bear their burdens rather than seek to please ourselves? Romans 15:2 tells why.

^{ESV} **Romans 15:2**... Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.

The reason is, is that over time our accommodation of their weakness, our helping them by helping to bear their weaknesses will lead to their eventual growth and maturity.

Now I am not sure if most of us believe that.

I am not sure that most of us are willing to bear another Christian's weaknesses in hope that they will eventually come to maturity. No, what happens usually is that we are willing to bear with another Christian's weakness only for a very short period of time. We tolerate them and their weaknesses with the expectation that they will snap out of it quickly and come to maturity and look and act just like us. We apply to them a far more rigid standard that we never want applied to us.

But that's not the idea behind the passage. No the idea behind the passage is a lot more enduring than that. I think the idea behind the passage is a lot more like how John Newton responded to William Cowper. You may remember the story about Newton and Cowper from one of Tom's sermons a year or so ago. But if you don't, let me take a minute or two and relate it to you because I think if you can come to understand how Newton treated Cowper you will understand something of what this passage has in mind. If you like the story you can read more about it by reading John Piper's book *The Roots of Endurance*.

John Newton, whom everyone remembers as the author of *Amazing Grace* was born to reprobate, seafaring father and a godly mother in 1725. His mother died when he was six leaving the boy to grow up almost completely on his own. Newton grew up a scoundrel. He went to sea as a teenager and turned into a

drunken, foul-mouthed sailor. Newton's cursing was so awful that his fellow sailors, no schoolgirls themselves, often referred to him as the *Great Blasphemer*.

Eventually, Newton moved up through the ranks and came to captain his own ship, a slave trader. Newton hauled slaves for a few years and made a pretty good living for himself till his hard drinking and profligacy caused him to have a seizure. Newton lost everything he owned.

Of course that didn't matter because God had other plans for Newton. In time God drew Newton to himself and redeemed his soul and turned Newton into a faithful and loving pastor. Newton the slave trader became known everywhere for his tender manner and forbearance with sinners. He drew all kinds of damaged people to his ministry and one of the most famous was a man named William Cowper.

Cowper's life had been desperately unhappy. His mother had also died when he was a boy and his father put him in boarding school when he was only six or seven and the other savaged him and beat him and probably molested him. Cowper lived in a world of constant despondency and depression. In those days, there were no medical treatments to allay depression. A person suffering from depression might have to suffer from it for decades. Cowper did.

Cowper tried to commit suicide at least three different times.

But through the influence of Newton, Cowper became a Christian and Newton knowing Cowper had some literary skill talked him into collaborating with him to write a hymnal. As a result, Newton spent twelve years messing with Cowper

and during that time Cowper managed to take up almost all of Newton's free time. Newton once wrote that over that twelve year period he never remembered any period of time longer than seven hours when Cowper wasn't in his home or in his study.

During the first six years of their time together, Cowper did pretty well but the next six years were a nightmare for Cowper. He was deeply depressed and always despondent. Still, Newton never deserted him. Cowper even lived in Newton's home during two of his darkest periods of depression, once for five months...once for twelve months.

In their relationship, Newton always paid the heaviest cost. Still he never gave up on Cowper. He never cast him out. He never abandoned him. The hymnal, on which they collaborated together, is a good example of that. The hymnal contained some four hundred hymns. Cowper only wrote sixty-nine. Newton wrote all the rest.

In the end, Cowper died depressed and all alone...all alone except for Newton who never gave up on him. Newton even preached his funeral saying, **"My friend suffered much here for some twenty-seven years, but eternity is long enough to make amends for all. For what is all he endured in this life, when compared with the rest which remains for the children of God"**

You see Newton had a larger view of things than most. He viewed his friends and even his friend's weaknesses through the lenses of eternity and that is what Paul appeals to the Romans to have. He wants them to have a view of life that is

bigger than themselves...that is concerned with more than the exercise of their freedom and the exercise of having their own way.

Now, to drive that idea home, Paul appeals to the example of Christ and it is fitting that he should, after all...

Jesus is the best example there ever was.

Look with me at Romans 15:3 and you can see how Paul appeals to Christ's extraordinary selflessness.

^{ESV} **Romans 15:3...** For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "**The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.**"

You even Jesus did not please himself. That is why to Paul's mind Jesus is such a good example. That is why Jesus is the best example ever.

Listen to John Chrysostom said about our Lord in a sermon first preached some 1600 years ago.

He had power not to have been reproached, power not to have suffered what He did suffer, had He been minded to look to His own things. Yet, He was not so minded. But through looking to our good He neglected His own.⁹

You see Chrysostom and for that matter were appealing to us to think like the Lord Jesus, to act like the Lord Jesus, to follow his manner and way. He did not look out for His own best interest. He did not look out for his own well-being but for the well-being of others.

And then Paul does the strangest thing. You would think that He would talk about how Jesus' chose not to look out for himself but rather looked for us to obtain for us our eternal salvation. But he doesn't do that. Instead, what he says is that Jesus thought the reputation of God was worth more than His own reputation.

You see Paul quotes Psalm 69 when he says...

^{ESV} Romans 15:3... "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me."

Look for a moment back in your Bible to Psalm 69 starting in verse 6.

^{ESV} Psalm 69:6...(Psa 69:6-9 ESV) ⁶ Let not those who hope in you be put to shame through me, O Lord GOD of hosts; let not those who seek you be brought to dishonor through me, O God of Israel. ⁷ For it is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that dishonor has covered my face. ⁸ I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother's sons. ⁹ For zeal for your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me.

You see Paul includes this quote from Psalm 69 to show that Jesus was willing to die for God's reputation. That Jesus endured the insults of men heaped upon the name of God and that he did that in order that God's name might be glorified in His humiliation.

And the implication is that a bit of humiliation in our own lives, in dealing with those saints around us who are weaker brothers ought to be an acceptable thing to us, even in our own self-serving pride and self-promotion.

You see I think argument is from the greater to the lesser. If He was willing to die for God's reputation hadn't we ought to be willing to live with a bit of humility in order that our weaker brothers and sisters might be built up in their faith.

Then Paul executes a masterstroke. Look at verse 4.

^{ESV} **Romans 15:4...** 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.

Do you see what he is saying? He is saying look it was not just that way with the Lord Jesus. He is saying it was that way throughout all of revealed Scripture, throughout all of the Old Testament. He is saying that this principle of humiliation to the benefit and growth of others is everywhere you look and that it can be seen throughout the Bible, example after example of men and women doing things, living out their lives in a way that benefited others and not themselves.

Now what stories or verses did he have in mind? I think he had it all in mind. You see you don't have to think very hard to see that living for the benefit of others has always been the pattern of God's people.

You can see it in the life of Abraham, of Joseph, of Moses, of Ruth, of Boaz, of David, of Ezekiel, of Isaiah. It occurs over and over and over again.

Now the benefit of following the example of our Lord and the benefit of knowing and following these wonderful stories in the Old Testament of sacrificial love and forbearance is that we are motivated to follow after their example. And Paul

tells us that when we do there will be a wonderful result. But he doesn't just tell us what that result will be. No, he actually puts that result in the midst of a prayer. Look at Romans 15:5-6.

^{ESV} **Romans 15:5...** 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.

Now do you notice anything striking about his prayer here? I would have expected it be **"heart and mind"** but it's not. Rather it's **"heart and mouth."** Why do you think that is? You see he is returning to his point...the point he has been making all along and this is it, "Forbearance in terms of what they eat and drink...showing their love for their brothers and sisters by accommodating them in their weaknesses is a sign of love and faithfulness and Christian obedience.

You see Paul has come full circle in his argument and returned to the start by saying that we ought to glorify God with our mouth by not steamrolling over our weaker brothers in terms of what we eat or drink. When we do that we are following the example of the Lord Jesus and that is fitting because He is the best example there ever was.

Let's pray.

Scriptura quidem docet, sed gratia donat, quod illa docet.¹⁰

Scripture teaches indeed, but grace gives, what the former teaches.

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans Volume 4: The New Humanity, Romans 12-16* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 1795. Boice writes: "For many years it has been common in the

evangelical church to play down the importance of Jesus Christ as an example. This is primarily a reaction to the liberal church's focus on Jesus as an example to the neglect of his deity and atoning work on the cross. Evangelicals have responded by saying, "It is not an example we need; it is a Savior." That is correct, but it is also true that the Bible presents Jesus as an example for those who have been saved by him, telling us that we must be increasingly like Jesus, whom we profess to love and serve. Our text in Romans is one instance of the way the Bible frequently refers to Jesus Christ as our example."

² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1952), 55-6.

³ John Calvin, *Commentary to the Romans*, Romans 15:1.

⁴ Some commentators do not like the break between chapter 14 and 15. I can see why. In one sense, Romans 15:1-6 continues and completes everything mentioned in Romans 14. In another sense, it seems to be headed to something new. Cf. Charles Hodge, *Commentary on Romans*, Romans 15:1. Hodge writes, "The separation of this passage from the preceding chapter is obviously unhappy, as there is no change in the subject. See also: Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* in the New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 865. Moo notes especially the change in person from 2nd singular to 1st plural.

⁵ John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News For the World* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 369.

⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary to the Romans*, Romans 15:1.

⁷ J.B. Phillips, *New Testament in Modern English*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1972), 336. Paraphrase of Romans 15:1.

⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary to the Romans*, Romans 15:2. Freely paraphrased by me.

⁹ John Chrysostom, "Homily 27" from his *Homilies on Paul*, Romans 15:3.

¹⁰ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on Romans*, quoting Luther. Romans 15:5.