

***The Mind of Christ toward One Another***  
*Romans 15:1-13*

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, most scientists believed that the earth was the center of the universe. They believed that the moon, sun, and planets revolved around the earth. Then along came Copernicus, an astronomer from Poland. Copernicus revived an old theory that perhaps the sun was the center of the universe. Toward the end of his life, Copernicus reluctantly allowed his theories to be published.

As you may know, Copernicus' ideas were attacked on both *scientific* and *theological* grounds. Scientifically, it didn't make sense that the earth was moving. If the earth is really spinning on an axis and speeding around the sun, why aren't people flying off into space in all directions? Theologically, it had long been church dogma that the earth was the center of the universe (based on a literalistic interpretation of Psalm 93:1 ["the world is firmly established; it will not be moved"] and other Scriptures). Eventually, of course, the theories of Copernicus won out. The result was a profound change in the scientific community, as well as in biblical interpretation. We now speak of the "Copernican Revolution" to describe the shift in thinking: we are not the center of the universe.

The local church exists to bring about a similar type of revolution spiritually and practically. We are each born into this world thinking that we are the center of the universe. Babies are cute, but there is nothing more selfish than a baby. The mission of the church is to bring about a revolution in which people come to see that "I'm not the center of the universe; the triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is the center of the universe." All things were made by Him and for Him. He is the Glorious One. Everything we do is supposed to show how glorious He really is.

One of the primary ways we are supposed to glorify God is through relationships in the body of Christ. By the way we treat each other, we are supposed to demonstrate that God is the center of our lives and the center of our fellowship and the center of our world. Each of us would say that **some** people are fairly easy to love; but others in the body of Christ are not - especially those who have different convictions than us. It's most natural to have a self-centered approach to such relationships; we need to learn a God-centered approach.

Today's passage is Romans 15:1-13. Paul is going to tell us that God is glorified when we treat each other the way Christ has treated us - especially those with differing convictions. In chapter 14 Paul introduced the categories of "stronger" and "weaker" Christians. Our best understanding is that the weak were Jewish Christians who didn't walk in full freedom in Christ. Their conscience demanded that they follow the old covenant dietary restrictions; they also felt it important to observe special holy days (such as Passover and the Sabbath). They weren't legalists whose convictions in any way compromised the gospel; they simply didn't walk in the full freedom they had in Christ. The strong are Gentile Christians (and some Jewish Christians) who understood their freedom from the OT law, specifically freedom from the dietary laws and from observing the holy days.

In chapter 14 Paul challenged the **strong not to look down on the weak** and hold them in contempt. They shouldn't try to force the weak to act in a way that violated their conscience. He challenged the **weak not to judge the strong**. Both the strong and the weak were accountable to God to follow their consciences and to walk in faith.

Today's passage still has in mind the categories of "the strong and the weak." But everything Paul writes in this passage applies to how we treat each other even when it's not a matter of freedom; it might simply be differing convictions. As we go through this passage I would encourage you to bring to mind those persons in the church (or in the body of Christ) with whom you disagree in significant ways. These disagreements might involve lifestyle choices, non-essential points of doctrine, political views, or issues of science and faith. Keep those persons in mind so that this isn't merely an abstract discussion. How you treat those people affects whether or not God is glorified.

Paul gives two commands in this passage. Each command reflects the mind of Christ, and each command leads to the glory of God.

***Following Jesus' example, please your neighbor. (Romans 15:1-6)***

As he does throughout chapter 14, Paul challenges the "strong" to be mindful of the "weak."

1 Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. 2 Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.

Notice that Paul puts himself in the category of "strong": "Now **we who are strong** ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength." Here Paul addresses the mentality that says, "Those who are weaker than me need to grow up. . . until they do I want nothing to do with them." Instead of ignoring or holding in contempt the weaker brother/sister, the strong are positively to "bear [their] weaknesses." You don't merely tolerate them; you positively help them.

When Paul adds, "and not just please ourselves," he is confronting my tendency to do only what pleases me and your tendency to do only what pleases you. Instead, Paul writes in verse 2, "Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification."

Paul isn't talking about being a "people pleaser" in a negative sense; nor does he mean "making them happy at all cost" (Kruse, p. 528). In some contexts, "pleasing" another person is wrong, especially if it means displeasing God (see Galatians 1:10). But here the contrast isn't between pleasing people and pleasing God; the contrast is between pleasing our neighbor and pleasing **ourselves**. Almost every time in the New Testament someone is designated as our "neighbor," we are told to love that person (13 out of 16 references). That's the point here as well.

He qualifies “pleasing your neighbor” by adding “for his good, to his edification.” We do this rather effortlessly with close friends and people we really like. When you’re in relationship with someone with convictions very different than yours, it’s much more challenging to ask, “How can I promote his/her ‘good’?” Or, “How can I build up this person?”

If we’re honest, sometimes we don’t really want such people to thrive. We want our opponents to struggle and fail; somehow we think that their struggles and failures will vindicate us and show that the way we’re living our lives is superior and right. But that is not the mind of Christ.

Beginning in verse 3 Paul points to the example of Christ. He says that if you name Jesus as Lord, it’s unthinkable that you’d adopt a pattern of relationships different from His!

3 For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.”

If Jesus wanted to please Himself, He never would have taken on flesh and blood. He became one of us so that He might “please His neighbor” and accomplish our good and build us up. In Mark 10:45 Jesus said of Himself that “the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.”

Paul quotes from Psalm 69:9 to reinforce the idea that Christ did not please Himself. As the Psalmist a thousand years earlier, Jesus experienced reproaches/insults from people who were spiritually inferior to him. If Jesus endured insults and all sorts of other trials, we shouldn’t be surprised that we are required to endure hardships. And when we do, we should follow His example. Instead of being selfish, we “please our neighbor.”

Having quoted from Psalm 69, Paul gives the reason he can take that Scripture as describing Jesus’ life and why we should take that Scripture as a paradigm for our lives.

4 For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

The Scriptures give us instruction in a number of different ways. Sometimes the Scriptures give precepts that instruct us how to live. Other times the Scriptures also give us instruction through the examples and patterns that are recorded. Psalm 69:9 would be such an example. Knowing that the psalmist had persevered in spite of insults instructs us to do the same.

Paul tells us that this instruction can give us us “perseverance and encouragement,” resulting in “hope.” I find that my perseverance and encouragement and hope are directly related to whether or not I’m allowing God to instruct me from the Scriptures.

Verses 5 and 6 are both a blessing and a challenge. Based on what he's just written, Paul writes:

5 Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, 6 so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul prays that God would grant that they would "be of the same mind with one another"; literally that they would "think the same thing." He's not asking that they would have the same conviction on debatable matters; he's already urged them to respect different convictions. He's asking that they have the same devotion to Christ Jesus. Verse 6 makes clear that their unity was essential if they were going to glorify God (show off just how glorious He is).

Again, the basic division was between Jews and Gentiles. We have a hard time appreciating how radical it was for Paul to teach that the division between them had been eliminated - that they had the same standing before God. The temptation for Jewish believers was to think, "If I don't keep my distance and maintain my identity, I will lose and they will win." The temptation for the Gentiles was to be embarrassed by the Jews: "They don't even eat meat! And they have all these scruples about the Sabbath and other holy days." Paul told them, "Please your neighbor - seeking their good and their edification so that together you can glorify God." That's how you show how glorious God is.

We should keep this original context in mind when we start thinking, "You don't understand; you can't imagine how stark the differences between me and the people I have in mind." Can you imagine how it must sound to God when we, in effect, say, "All we have in common is the salvation secured by the death and resurrection of your Son"!

I'd encourage you to find ways to "please your neighbor" with whom you have disagreements. If you can't be in his/her presence, pray for that person. Otherwise speak words of encouragement. Find tangible ways to build him/her up. In this way we go from a self-centered approach to relationships (where everything is about *me*) to a God-centered approach (where God's reputation is what really matters).

***Following Jesus' example, accept one another. (Romans 15:7-13)***

Paul expands the scope to everybody in the church (not only the strong) when he writes:

7 Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.

Paul used this word "accept" in chapter 14:1 when he told the strong to accept the weak in faith. To accept someone means to welcome or receive the other person into full fellowship instead of treating him/her like a second-class Christian.

Again, Jesus is our standard, our example. We don't treat others the way they have treated us; we treat others the way Christ has treated us. This is the basic ethic found in the New Testament: we treat each other the way God in Christ has treated us. Here Paul says, "Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us. . ." How has Christ accepted us? Fully, unconditionally, permanently, personally.

If you are a follower of Christ and have a hard time believing that He really accepts you fully, this command should bring your encouragement. Surely Jesus doesn't expect you to do something He hasn't done. He wouldn't tell you to welcome others into your full fellowship if He hadn't welcomed you into His.

At the very end of the verse Paul writes that accepting one another as Christ has accepted us brings glory to God. ***Our unity brings God glory.*** It enhances His reputation; it makes Him look good. Why? For the same reason your parents look good if you and your siblings love and accept each other. People might even say, "When I see how you and your brothers and sisters treat each other, I have to conclude that your mom and dad did ***something*** right." In a similar way, when we accept one another just as Christ accepted us, both the seen and the unseen world take notice. Some will acknowledge, "They must have a great heavenly Father to have such great love for each other even though humanly speaking they have so many differences."

In verses 8 through 12 Paul returns to a theme that runs throughout Romans, namely, that the gospel of Jesus is the power of God to ***everyone*** who believes, to the Jew first and then to the Gentile (see Romans 1:16). In verses 8 and 9 we see this progression. Paul sometimes referred to the Jews as "the circumcision" since that was the sign of their covenant with God.

8 For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, 9 and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written,  
"Therefore I will give praise to You among the Gentiles,  
And I will sing to Your name."

Jesus becoming a servant to the Jews confirmed that God was faithful to the promises He had made to Israel. In verse 9 Paul mentions that Jesus' servanthood also led to the Gentiles glorifying God when ***they*** experienced His mercy. To show that the praise of Jews ***and*** Gentiles was ***always*** God's plan, Paul quotes four passages from every part of the Hebrew Scriptures (the "writings," the Law, and the prophets).

The second half of verse 9 is a quotation from Psalm 18:49. There David praises God for giving him victory over the nations; Gentiles who had been conquered would hear God praised.

In verse 10 Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 32:43. Here the Gentiles/nations are not merely hearing others praise God; they are called to praise God themselves.

10 Again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people."

In verse 11 Paul quotes Psalm 117:1 which gives a call for Gentiles to praise God (even independent of Israel).

11 And again, "Praise the Lord all you Gentiles,  
And let all the peoples praise Him."

Finally, Paul quotes from Isaiah 11:10; in this last Scripture the Gentiles are finding their hope in Jesus, the "root of Jesse."

12 Again Isaiah says, "There shall come the root of Jesse,  
And He who arises to rule over the Gentiles,  
In Him shall the Gentiles hope."

Isaiah looked to the day when the Messiah would reign over the nations. Instead of cowering in fear, the Gentiles would "hope" in Him. Hope is confidence about the future - about your well-being and about your ultimate salvation. The Gentile Christians in Rome had experienced this hope in fulfillment of Isaiah's promise. Since the gospel had created this community that included both Jews and Gentiles, they needed to accept one another as fully as Christ had accepted them. To do anything else would hinder the glory of God from being on full display.

Paul closes with another benediction/blessing that picks up several of the key truths he has been teaching:

13 Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In 14:17 Paul wrote that the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of "righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." When he says "may God fill you with all joy and peace in believing" he is saying that He wants them to experience the kingdom; he wants God to reign in their midst. If they ignored his challenge to accept each other and to please each other they wouldn't experience the fulness of the kingdom and the Spirit; they would experience the emptiness of the flesh.

Notice that Paul envisioned the church to be a community of believers that "abounds in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." We should be a hope-filled community; we should look to the future with confidence (in God), not in fear. We have this hope when we accept one another as Christ has accepted us.

**A Caveat:** Nothing we've talked about this morning nullifies other teachings found in Scripture about healthy relationships. Today's passage emphasizes pleasing others and accepting others. But this doesn't mean that we don't have any boundaries. There will still be times when we confront others about their hurtful words and actions. We don't enable bad behavior under the banner of unity and "accepting one another."

At the same time the strong message of this passage involves a commitment to treating each other the way Christ has treated us. This commitment changes the way we think about relationships in the body of Christ. All sorts of pettiness and sniping are immediately irrelevant; they simply fade away because they are so obviously at odds with Jesus' example.

If people looked at the way you treat those with whom you disagree, what would they conclude about your life? that you live for yourself or for God? If we seek to "please our neighbor" and "accept one another," they will see the mind of Christ on full display; they will see a tangible example of how Christ treated us. He didn't seek to please Himself; He came to be a sacrifice so that we might know God. And God's reputation will grow.