

***Interdependence in the Body of Christ***  
***Romans 15:22-33***

Today we're going to discuss a foundational reality of the body of Christ: our interdependence. Basically this means that ***you were never meant to walk with Christ alone***; you ***need*** other people in the body of Christ in all sorts of ways. And I was never meant to walk with Christ alone; I need many, many things from others in the body of Christ. This is a spiritual reality that is true whether or not we understand and live it out.

We're probably in many different places when it comes to our experience with interdependence in the body of Christ. Some of you are already experiencing the interdependence we'll be talking about today; you couldn't imagine trying to follow Christ w/o others. You have others who know you well enough to speak into your life; they bear your burdens; you are able to "confess your sins to them."

Others of you may have never experienced what I'm talking about. Perhaps you are used to living your life in a fairly independent way. Maybe it's been a matter of survival; maybe it's a matter of busyness; maybe it's a matter of trust.

Perhaps most of you are somewhere in the middle. Perhaps you have experienced interdependence in the past. But you've been burned and or betrayed and are very reluctant to risk it again.

I say this to acknowledge that we will each hear this message in light of our experience (for good or evil). Your experience is important, but there is something more important to consider: ***interdependence is God's design***. Honestly, you cannot make much progress in your walk with God by yourself. You need other believers.

Today's passage highlights three aspects of interdependence. Here Paul explains his future travel plans. As he does so, he talks about a web of relationships in his life. As he talks about these relationships, his deep convictions about interdependence in the body of Christ become obvious. Noticing how Paul thought about relationships in the body of Christ can give us insight into how we should pursue similar relationships both individually and corporately.

As we go through this passage I'd encourage you to lock in on one aspect to pursue over the next few weeks. Some of you are leaving K-State and your community of believers; this message can remind you of the type of interdependence you will need to reestablish elsewhere. Some of you are only leaving for the summer. Some of you will be on ministry teams but others of you might find yourself quite isolated spiritually. Allow this passage to give you a grid for what you need to pursue.

***Expressing Interdependence through Mutual Encouragement (Romans 15:22-24, 1:8-15; Hebrews 10:24-25)***

Last week we saw that Paul had delayed traveling to Rome because his priority was to take the gospel to people who'd never heard the name of Jesus. He had traveled all

across the Roman Empire from Jerusalem to Illyricum (Albania). Beginning in verse 22 he explains that he is now ready to visit them in Rome.

22 For this reason I have often been prevented from coming to you; 23 but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you

In verse 23 Paul writes that he had completed his ministry “in these regions” (Asia Minor) and that he had “for many years a longing to come to” Rome. Back in chapter 1 Paul had written this:

11 For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; 12 that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other’s faith, both yours and mine.

Paul probably isn’t talking about imparting the gifts of the Spirit he describes in chapter 12 such as prophecy, service, teaching, etc. But Paul could impart another type of “spiritual gift” through his influence in their lives. What he offered them would be a **gift** because it was freely given; it would be **spiritual** because it was empowered by the Holy Spirit. This spiritual gift would help establish them in their faith so that they would stand strong.

Even though Paul was an apostle and was spiritually mature, it is clear from verse 12 that he anticipated that his time with the Romans would be a time of **mutual** encouragement. Encouragement doesn’t only flow downhill from the more mature to everybody else. There is a mutual encouragement between believers even when there’s great disparity between their spiritual maturity. This mutual encouragement was part of the reason Paul wanted to visit the church at Rome.

Back in chapter 15 Paul continues explaining his desire to come to Rome:

24 whenever I go to Spain—for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while—

Paul ultimately wanted to preach Christ in Spain. Since Rome was on the way to Spain Paul tells the Romans, “I hope to see you in passing.” He also mentions, “to be helped on my way there by you.” Paul probably anticipated getting some financial help from the Roman church and perhaps coworkers to join him in traveling to Spain. At the end of verse 24 Paul mentions “when I have first enjoyed your company for a while.” As he indicated in chapter 1, Paul valued the mutual encouragement that he and the Roman Christians would supply each other.

What Paul is describing here should be the norm in the life of the Christian. Every believer should expect to give and receive encouragement in the normal flow of life in the body of Christ. We find this taught several places. One of the most explicit is Hebrews 10:24-25.

24 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

The premise here is that you should have other people who spend time thinking about your life and how they can influence you to love better and to do more good for others. When you get together the time they've spent pondering your life shows up as encouragement. As you know, encouragement isn't merely saying nice, flowery things; encouragement involves saying and doing things that give you the courage to pursue the will of God in your life. This type of mutual encouragement isn't icing on the cake; it is essential for our walks with God.

Not many people in our culture and in our world actually slow down and think about anybody but themselves and their immediate family. Can you imagine how loved and wanted you would feel if you knew somebody were spending time and energy pondering your life and circumstances and then brought that insight to their relationship with you? And can you imagine how others would feel if they knew you were expending that same type of spiritual energy on their behalf?

This type of mutual encouragement can't really be programmed into the life of the church. We want this to happen through the structures of the church - and sometimes it does. Some have found mutually encouraging friendships through life groups and men's/women's groups. If you're not experiencing such relationships, I would urge you to talk with somebody you trust. Express your desire and even ask if they would be up for such mutual encouragement.

***Expressing Interdependence through sharing Materially and Spiritually (Romans 15:24-27)***

After telling the Romans about his plans to visit them on the way to Spain, he mentions that he is in fact going the opposite direction first. The reason for this detour is linked to his unique role as an apostle to Gentiles.

25 but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. 26 For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.

The "saints" were the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who suffered great poverty. The church in Jerusalem was poor for a variety of reasons. First, there was a famine throughout that area of the world as Agabus prophesied in Acts 11:27-30. As well, Jews who became followers of Jesus suffered discrimination in the Jewish capital of Jerusalem. In response, the church at Antioch determined to take up a collection among the Gentiles churches to be sent to the poor at Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas were given the responsibility of collecting and delivering these funds to Jerusalem.

Here in verse 26 Paul mentions that the churches in Macedonia and Achaia had indeed contributed to this fund. In verse 27 he explains why they were so eager to contribute:

27 Yes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things.

This is a fascinating statement about how Gentile churches in Macedonia and Greece were interdependent with the Jewish church at Jerusalem. The Jewish church at Jerusalem had provided the first apostles and had suffered great persecution because of their devotion to Jesus. Because they had shared their spiritual riches with the Gentiles, now the Gentile churches were indebted to share with them materially. The churches in Greece and Macedonia were eager to repay this debt.

28 Therefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain. 29 I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

Paul had a strong sense of responsibility to finish this mission of delivering the collection to the poor at Jerusalem. The loop would be closed, so to speak, when the Gentile churches expressed their love for the Jewish church at Jerusalem.

We see this type of interdependence among churches throughout the New Testament. They shared spiritual and material resources so that the entire body of Christ would be stronger. At Faith we have experienced this type of interdependence with other churches in the past and plan to develop such interdependence more fully in the future. Let me give a couple of examples.

This church exists (in part) because other E-Free churches in this area were willing to share material and spiritual resources with us. In 1987 five other churches came together to form what we called a "Mother Church Committee" - including E Free churches in Wichita, Smith Center, and Topeka. They sent people to serve on an advisory board; they sent money every month for about four years. We will forever be grateful for their willingness to share with us spiritually and materially

A couple of weeks ago Luther Eatman from Bridge of Hope Community Church preached here at Faith. Bridge of Hope is an E-Free church in the urban core of Kansas City, Kansas. We have a partnership with Bridge of Hope that we hope to develop further in the future. We have the capacity to help Bridge of Hope with some financial resources as well as people resources. You may have noticed in the eBlast that this Saturday a team from Faith is going over to Bridge of Hope for their "Mega Day." So far I think about 5 of us are going over to help do some projects at their facility. We'd love to have more people join us. There are certain things that we bring to that church. And there are other things that Bridge of Hope can bring to Faith. Specifically, they are far ahead of us in terms of reaching hopeless people their community with the gospel and with tangible, practical help. Lots of people in their church were living on the streets with all sorts of addictions; they typically begin living in their transitional housing, begin coming to church, come to faith in Christ, serve in the church, get job training, etc. They can coach and teach us tons of things we need to learn.

Of course this type of spiritual and material sharing can happen between individuals as well as between churches.

***Expressing Interdependence through Prayer (Romans 15:30-33)*** In these verses Paul pleads with the Romans to pray for his mission of taking the contribution to Jerusalem. Paul believed that the prayers of other believers moved the hand of God. Yes, Paul himself prayed; but he also enlisted others to pray for him. Notice the intensity in Paul's appeal:

30 Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me,

Appealing to them as family ("brothers"), Paul urges them "by our Lord Jesus Christ"; his appeal has the authority of Jesus behind it. And he urges them "by the love of the Spirit"; the love that the Spirit had produced in them should motivate them to pray. Paul pleads with them, "***strive together*** with me in your prayers to God for me." To strive is to wrestle or fight someone. The image is that of wrestling with God about a matter - much as Jacob did in Genesis 32. Instead of a flippant, one-off prayer of "Lord, be with Paul," he wants them to join him in prayer and strive ***with him*** and ***for him***.

Specifically, Paul wanted protection and blessing while in Jerusalem.

31 that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints;

Paul first requests that he "may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea" - a reference to Jews who opposed Paul as a follower of Christ. Paul had good reason to request such prayers for protection. Acts 27 records that when Paul entered the temple in Jerusalem he was dragged outside by the crowd. Before they could kill him the Roman soldiers intervened and took him into custody.

He also requests "that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints"; he wanted the Jewish believers to receive the contribution from the Gentiles churches as it was intended. When you think about it, it wasn't a given that they would automatically accept the gift or the motives of those who brought it. As we've seen throughout Romans, there were tensions between Jewish and Gentile believers. So Paul requested prayer for this ministry of delivering the gift to Jerusalem.

The desired result is given in verse 32:

32 so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing rest in your company. 33 Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

He wanted to come to Rome 1) in joy (not in sorrow), 2) by the will of God (should God so desire). And once in Rome he wanted to "find refreshing rest in [their] company"; he wanted their fellowship to be refreshing/nourishing. We know from Acts 27 and 28 that

Paul did make it to Rome, but he arrived in chains as a Roman prisoner. There he spent two years under house arrest. That was probably not the scenario Paul anticipated; but that was the will of God. Ultimately the prayers Paul requested were answered.

Intercession is one of the core ways we can live out our interdependence in the body of Christ. We'll be teaching on prayer extensively this fall. This summer we're doing a series entitled "Desperate": what to do when you're desperate. The Bible is full of examples of how godly people respond to desperate circumstances. We'll see that one of the core things they do is pray: they beat on the doors of heaven asking God to move. What we're saying here this morning is that one of things you can do for others who are desperate is to "strive together in prayer" **for them** and **with them**.

I'd encourage you - if you aren't already - to begin practicing the type of intercession Paul urged the Romans to pray. You probably know someone who is desperate, someone who needs God to do something they can't do for themselves. Covenant together with that person, committing that "By the grace of God I will strive together with you for the things you need God to do."

Much about prayer is a mystery - beyond our scrutiny. But what is very, very clear from Scripture is that some things happen simply because people **have** prayed, and other things do not happen because people **have not** prayed. It is possible that your friend will be delivered from some sin or some affliction because you've been striving in prayer. It is possible that somebody will become healthy in spirit or in body because you've been pleading with God on their behalf. It is possible that somebody will come to Christ in part because you've been striving in prayer on their behalf. Intercession is one of the core ways we express our interdependence in the body of Christ.

**Concluding Thought.** What are you willing to risk when it comes to experiencing interdependence in the body of Christ? What are you willing to risk this week, this month, this year?