

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Epistle to the Romans

Chapter 15 – Fulfil Our Duties

[NKJV Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Introduction

It was not too long ago now that I was preparing for a radio talk on Chapter 11 of the book of Romans. At the time, I felt that I had been handed one of the more complex chapters of the book, so perhaps I can be thankful that I can now cover a chapter which is in many respects much more straightforward. However, I have found that, although the themes are simple, they touch on ground that is full of problems and complexity.

It reminded me of some gardening I have been doing recently. I have been landscaping much of the rear of my garden which has been complex and taken a lot of work. Having finished the first bit, I looked at another part of the garden which I just wanted to dig over. A much simpler task! Or so I thought. When I came to do the work, the original plan to dig the area over was not changed, but I had not accounted for all of the roots and other debris in the patch I was dealing with. It remains unfinished!

Our passage today is a bit like this. The topic is simple; that of our duty to be at unity with other believers, with a focus on glorifying God. However, we don't have to go too far in Church history to see how complex and difficult a duty this is. As the years have gone on since that wonderful start of the church, the complexities, differences and disunity have continued to get worse, like a whole load of deep roots just below the surface, causing many problems within the Church.

Having said all of that though, I do not wish to be gloomy, and our chapter will help with avoiding such thoughts. Paul sets before us a helpful and practical chapter on the subject. The instructions for our duty towards unity are clearly stated in the first few verses and this is where I will spend most of my time during this talk. The rest of the chapter provides some examples, starting with the best and most complete example from our Lord Jesus. Let us then turn to our first section which covers the first six verses of chapter 15 of the Book of Romans.

Unity of Believers

“We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, leading to edification. For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.” For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In these verses, the apostle Paul gives us a clear instruction. He is following on from the comments that he has made in the previous chapter. However, the focus here is on the natural

characteristic which causes most problems amongst people: the desire to do what we want, come what may. Our society today promotes this idea more and more. Phrases like 'me time' and 'it's right for me at this time' are common ideas. But this is not the teaching of Christianity.

As I have considered this chapter, I have come to the conclusion that there are only two things where we can insist on our own way. The first is with regard to gaining our salvation through belief in the work of the Lord Jesus. We must not let anything detract or pull us out of the way of this as it is the single most important decision of our lives. The second is when it comes to following the moral teachings of Scripture. Where society's moral standards go against the clear teaching of Scripture, then outside influences should not divert us from living our lives in a way that is pleasing to God. I use that term 'our own way' very carefully as these are not really things of our way, but the will of God for us in our lives.

This section has several similarities to chapter six of Romans. In that chapter, Paul is dealing with the issues of people thinking that they were now free to do as they pleased, particularly regarding doing things that were clearly wrong. Paul put that particular issue to bed in chapter six. But the statement in verse 18 of that chapter – that we are slaves to righteousness – opens a broad range of things other than our lifestyle choices.

We can point to numerous scriptures which talk about how we are to behave towards our fellow believers. Paul is more than justified in bringing out the idea that we must not do just as we please when we are with other believers, bearing with their weaknesses. We have a duty of care and concern for those that we meet with regularly. It seems fitting that the book that comes after Romans is the first epistle to the Corinthians. The believers in Corinth were certainly guilty of not caring much about their fellow believers and doing as they pleased in the assembly. The whole book is pretty much about Paul setting in order all of their issues, with many of them linked to this problem of doing as we please.

I suppose a natural question would be to ask why we must do this. Do we really need to worry about individuals who may be difficult or have scruples about things that may potentially hold everyone else back from doing the work of God? The short answer is obviously yes. Other than the fact that we are told to in the Scriptures, I have four slightly more detailed reasons as to why this is necessary for us all. Naturally, there are more that could be stated, but these are the ones I want to bring out now.

My first point is that of leading to isolation. I suppose this can be reached from both directions; those who are weaker avoiding meeting with others to avoid being challenged on their weaknesses, and the strong may become so uncaring that nobody wishes to meet with them. Any situation which leads to people being isolated from other believers is never a good condition to be in. Our main purpose here is to be a witness to the world around us of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to build up and encourage other believers. People in isolation are not able to do either of these things effectively. Even the apostle Paul when he was in prison needed people around him.

The second of my reasons begins with that command from the Lord Himself in chapter 13, verses 34 and 35, of the Gospel of John, which is to love one another. The key aspect here is the witness that this gives to those around us. The way we deal with each other in the church is a key part of our witness in a world that increasingly promotes looking after number one. Kindness, care and patience are so rare in our society that it can have a huge impact on people when they see it being practised between believers. Riding roughshod over people who we disagree with on a point, even if we are right, will only show us to be the same as everyone else.

Moving onto the third aspect that I want to bring out, let me list some of those traits of the fruit of the Spirit: peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control. All of these traits are considered worthy attributes for a Christian to have. Where do we hone and develop these traits? It can only be in our lives here; we cannot perfect them in heaven. It is only here that you can develop these

things, and with our fellow believers is where it starts. A lot can be said regarding showing these things to those who do not believe, but it is far more challenging to have to demonstrate these things with fellow believers. It is also something that helps when our own weaknesses are demonstrated. How much easier it is to bear with weaknesses of other believers who are gentle and longsuffering towards us!

My final point is regarding the aim of this passage, which is captured in verse six: to bring glory to God as a collective group. Believers are meant to work together with the aim of increasing our praise and worship of God for His gift of salvation. Isolated believers are never as strong and effective in this area. We need the encouragement of other believers to build us up and strengthen us. This ultimately leads to greater worship and a stronger outreach effort. I will not talk about outreach results being linked here as only God can work such things. But where there is disunity, the Gospel is hampered, and usually praise to God is not what it should be.

Before I move on though, it is important to deal with the difficult question that such discussions bring up. Does the thought of bearing with those who are weaker not result in assemblies and churches being limited to the desires of people who like things a certain way or feel strongly about a particular issue? My primary response to this is that the word 'scruples' which is used in the first verse is never to compromise the truths of Scripture. These are only to be things that are not clear or open to different views and applications. Where Scripture is clear then there should be no compromise. Our churches and assemblies should also be functioning in a way to avoid these difficulties. Those who have responsibility should also ensure that the truth is always being taught, and not opinions, traditions or preferences. I would also add that these 'scruples' should never be allowed to cause others who are young in the faith to stumble, or for the Gospel to be hindered. But most of all, we should focus on the aim of the passage, which is to ensure we are not pleasing ourselves, but encouraging one another to bring glory to God.

The Great Example of Christ

We can now move to another topic where we consider the great example that the Lord Jesus Christ has given us. This is first brought out in verses 3 and 4 of our chapter, and is continued through verses 7 to 13:

“Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God. Now I say that Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers, and that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy, as it is written: “For this reason I will confess to You among the Gentiles, and sing to Your name.” And again he says: “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people!” And again: “Praise the LORD all you Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples!” And again, Isaiah says: “There shall be a root of Jesse; and He who shall rise to reign over the Gentiles, in Him the Gentiles shall hope.” Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

It is, of course, most helpful of the apostle to bring out this example of the Lord Jesus here. We often say that Jesus is our ultimate example for anything. But on this occasion, His example puts a stop on any concern we could have about this topic. The statement in verses three and four give us the general way in which He has dealt with those who are weak. Now, earlier I mentioned that it is good for us to learn this because when our own weaknesses are brought out, people will have an example to follow in terms of bearing with us. But this is not so with our Lord and Saviour. He has no weaknesses as we all should know. He was the perfect, spotless One.

Let us consider then what we are dealing with here. We have on the one hand, a Person who is perfect in every way, never failing to do what is righteous and good. On the other, we have each one of us, total failures in meeting the righteous requirements of a Holy God. We are unable to

help ourselves, and naturally opposed to God in every way. Now, imagine if our typical attitude was the one applied by our Saviour in this situation. Instead of coming to save us, Jesus stays put where He is! After all, we would only hold Him back. It is our problem, not His, and all sorts of other reasons could be put forward and used to avoid Him coming to save us. The result would be that we would be eternally lost with no hope of salvation, facing an eternity of separation from God. Yet this is not the choice the Lord took. He did choose to deal with us, even taking upon Himself the punishment that should have been put on us. And the result? Countless myriads of people saved, all of whom can, with one mind and mouth, glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

But perhaps that aspect is hard for us to fathom. After all, we are dealing with the single most incredible work that has ever been accomplished. So, in the event that this particular example is beyond our comprehension, we have a second example which is a bit more tangible for everyday experiences. This is given to us in verses 8 to 13. In these verses we are looking at an issue that we can all relate to, that of difference of peoples, race or nationality - whatever way you want to put it. And this particular division, between Jews and Gentiles has been around for a very long time. The general point regarding the wonder of the Gospel message, is that the work of the Lord has opened up an access to God that is not only resulting in the Gentiles being given the same access to that of those who are Jews, but actually providing something better than that which had gone before. But even on a day to day level: Imagine for a few moments the believers in Rome, a mix of people who had been devout Jews, steeped in the traditions and teachings of the law, and Gentiles who had come out of a world where anything goes. Now they were all mixed together.

I think that it is probably much easier to leave the things of the world behind, than to let go of those things that you had been told were absolutely essential for worshipping God. Such an arrangement would very quickly result in divisions and splits and other such things. Even today in the wider church, which is full of denominations and various splits, I do not think we can really appreciate how difficult it would have been in the early church. Yet the solution is the same, our example of Christ, who bore with us and has removed every barrier that we could have, in order to allow us to come together for the mutual worship of our Saviour God.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the only solution to these things and the moment we stray from our consideration of Him in all our decisions, responses and words, we will find division between believers. It is essential for us always to have that thought in mind, regarding our actions, as to whether what we are doing is following His example and resulting in the glorification of God.

Paul's Own Example

Having set before us the wonderful example of our Lord Jesus, Paul now turns to his own circumstances and example. I suppose we are always in danger of thinking that the example of the Lord is too high for us to attain, so it is useful to have something more attainable to consider with such a topic. For the sake of time please read verses 14 to 21 after the broadcast. This section is a reminder of the specific work Paul had to preach to the Gentiles. He is led by God to minister to the Gentiles and does not hold back from his responsibility to pass on this teaching he has received. He is continuing the great work of the Lord and has great joy in his work of saving those of the gentiles. Never do we get the impression that Paul was ashamed of his work in leading Gentiles to Christ, and he never loses his desire for his own people to be saved either. He is willing that everyone should be saved. But he is also giving another example of his desire for unity. He does not look to overrule or overshadow anyone, playing the great apostle. If God has already appointed someone to work either in teaching or preaching the Gospel, he does not need to wade in because of who he is. Paul was ever eager for the unity of the work, only going where he was directed by God.

Let us now consider the second part of Paul's example in verses 22 to 33:

“For this reason I also have been much hindered from coming to you. But now no longer having a place in these parts, and having a great desire these many years to come to you, whenever I journey to Spain, I shall come to you. For I hope to see you on my journey, and to be helped on my way there by you, if first I may enjoy your company for a while. But now I am going to Jerusalem to minister to the saints. For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem. It pleased them indeed, and they are their debtors. For if the Gentiles have been partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister to them in material things. Therefore, when I have performed this and have sealed to them this fruit, I shall go by way of you to Spain. But I know that when I come to you, I shall come in the fullness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ. Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me, that I may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, that I may come to you with joy by the will of God, and may be refreshed together with you. Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen.”

Paul is again bringing very practical examples before the believers. Clearly throughout these verses, there is a desire to be with fellow believers. Naturally, the work that Paul has to do prevents him from going where he wants, but the desire is not diminished by this. The gift that Paul was to take to the believers in Jerusalem was again linked to this desire for unity. The Gentile believers had benefited from the outpouring of the Gospel from Jerusalem. Now they could be a part of the support for those believers in Jerusalem who were suffering hardship and poverty. Those believers who had provided the gift were not providing from great wealth themselves but recognised a need that had to be met in some way. Paul was keen to be involved, not so he could claim any credit for himself, but to be sure that the gift was accepted and that the unity of believers was acknowledged and so strengthened those in Jerusalem.

Finally, on these verses it is encouraging to see the genuine eagerness Paul had to see other believers. He was planning his missionary journey to Spain but would go out of his way to see them. I suppose it could be argued that it is a reasonable stop on the journey, but I do not think this is how Paul saw it. He wanted to take the opportunity when it was there. What an example this is to us. It would be easy to think that, given the work Paul was going to undertake in Spain (should he get there of course), perhaps he should relax on the way or get his mind in the right place rather than tire himself out visiting other believers. But not only did Paul see a visit to other believers as important for their building up, but it was also essential for his own encouragement and refreshment. Being with other believers and sharing the praise and glorification of God together was the best preparation for any work he was going to undertake. What a challenge it is for us to have this in mind for ourselves! The next time we have a really important activity, perhaps it would be better to seek time with believers in preparation, rather than take time off on our own.

Closing Remarks

As I mentioned earlier, I don't think that this chapter is a particularly difficult one from a doctrinal point of view. However, the issue of seeking unity for the purpose of glorifying God together is no less challenging. May we all be encouraged to have the mind of Christ, and to follow the example of the Apostle Paul, in desiring unity, having care for one another, and seeking the mutual glorification of God.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on The Epistle to the Romans, Chapter 15 – Fulfil our Duties, talk number T1182.

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