

**LIBERTY AND UNITY**  
**ROMANS 15:1-6**

I began praying for this church long before I knew the name of this church. I knew that coming straight out of seminary to pastor a church that both the church and I would need particular attributes if we were going to thrive together. Because I didn't know the particular needs of the church, I prayed in generalities; one desire dominated my prayers: that God would give peace and unity to the church body. (And in God's grace, He has given us tremendous unity for a great many years.) What motivated that prayer was an awareness of God's emphasis on the unity of His people in the Bible. Here are just a *few* examples:

- ✓ "For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another....*Be* devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor..." (Rom. 12:4-5, 10)
- ✓ "For even as the body is one and *yet* has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many." (1 Cor. 12:12-14)
- ✓ "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:27-28)
- ✓ "For He Himself is our peace, who made both *groups into* one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, *which is* the Law of commandments *contained in* ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, *thus* establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity....for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father." [Eph. 2:14-16, 18]
- ✓ "Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Eph. 4:1-3)
- ✓ "For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and *attaining* to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, *resulting in* a true knowledge of God's mystery, *that is*, Christ *Himself*..." (Col. 2:1-2)

Along with those reminders of the priority of our unity, the Lord also provides many warnings against factions and disunity (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:19-22; 2 Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 4:30-32; Tt. 3:1-3; Js. 4:1-4).

Romans 14 was all about liberty. Most of us don't think too often about the question of liberty, but as Paul thought about the application of the truths of the gospel (Rom. 12-15), the issue he talked about most in those chapters (by far!) was the issue of liberty. It was no insignificant issue in the early church and it should be significant to us as well. As Paul concludes the discussion, we can still say that the theme we identified in Romans 14 carries through the opening section of this chapter:

***USE YOUR INDIVIDUAL FREEDOMS AS A MEANS OF PRESERVING THE CORPORATE UNITY OF THE BODY.***

While Paul has spoken throughout chapter 14 about how to exercise liberty, here he is particularly overt in talking about how we can *preserve unity* within the exercise of our liberties. The Lord calls us to unity within the exercise of our liberty — we use our personal liberty in a way that preserves our corporate unity. Corporate unity is more essential than personal liberty. At the end of chapter 14, we considered the goals of unity; here Paul gives us **five practices** to cultivate unity in the body:

1. Cultivate Unity by Carrying the **WEAKNESSES** of the Weak (v. 1)
2. Cultivate Unity by Working for the **PLEASURE** of Others (v. 2)
3. Cultivate Unity by Following the **EXAMPLE** of Christ (v. 3)
4. Cultivate Unity by Remembering the **HOPE** of Scripture (v. 4)
5. Cultivate Unity by Heeding the **PRAYER** of Paul (vv. 5-6)

- In verse 1 Paul is still thinking about the issues of liberty because he refers to **strong** and **weak**. But he uses different terminology (he calls the weak, “without strength”), which suggests he might be thinking about the issue in a slightly different way. Paul uses the word **Now** to make a shift in thought.
  - ✓ In these verses, he is going to be thinking about how to use our liberty to produce unity in the body.
  - ✓ In vv. 7-13, he is going to continue the theme of unity and apply it to Jews and Gentiles.
  - ✓ In vv. 14ff, he is going to expand the idea of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the plan of God to the priority of evangelism and of expanding the church and missions.
  - ✓ In vv. 1-6, what can we do to promote unity?

### 1. Cultivate Unity by Carrying the WEAKNESSES of the Weak (v. 1)

- The first thing Paul says about unity he addresses directly to the strong — **we who are strong....**
  - ✓ We’ve noted previously that while Paul doesn’t say it overtly, we can probably assume that most people are “strong” — most don’t feel compelled to maintain dietary restrictions from OT.
  - ✓ Notice also that Paul identifies himself with the strong (cf. also 14:14). That is somewhat ironic since he is a Jew and we might expect that he would cling to OT Law and requirements.
  - ✓ While he doesn’t adhere to the Law, he *does* assume responsibility to care for others in the body.
- The care he exhorts the strong to practice is to **bear the weaknesses of those without strength**.
  - ✓ When he says **without strength**, he clearly means, “the weak.” But this is the first time he uses that term, which actually seems to emphasize the struggle of the weak: they *don’t have the strength of conviction* to not carry out some responsibilities of the Law — they are unconvinced (14:2).
  - ✓ With this phrase, Paul makes clear that there is an ongoing obligation to act in a particular way with the weak. And while unstated, that obligation is ultimately to the Lord, not just to the weak.
  - ✓ The particular obligation the strong have is to **bear the weaknesses** — and that word has the idea of enduring and tolerating — being patient with the weaknesses. But it also goes further than that. It means to carry those burdens with and for them (cf. 11:18; Gal. 6:2).
  - ✓ To bear those weaknesses means that we are not critical or condescending but respectful, kind, understanding, and gracious in our conduct and speech with them.
  - ✓ This doesn’t mean that the strong have to do all that the weak do, but that they are sympathetic to their decision (“tell me why you are compelled to do that...”), graciously interact with them (“how do you understand freedom and the Law?...Can I show you what God says about the Law?...”), and even help them maintain a clear conscience by keeping what they believe they need to do (14:23).

- When we think about the use of liberties in the church, it is easy to say, “I have a right and I’m going to exercise it...” (e.g., “I want pork ribs!...and I don’t want to go to that Saturday worship/feast day...”)
- Paul says there is something more important than that — we should ***not just please ourselves***. In other words, the temptation is to look out for #1 (evidently that was a first century problem, not just a 21<sup>st</sup> century American problem!).
  - ✓ Paul is *not* suggesting that the believer is prohibited from doing anything that is pleasurable to himself. But he is saying that one’s own pleasure is secondary to the care of others. And he is implying that we get our greatest pleasure not through self-indulgence, but through selfless giving.
  - ✓ Our goal is to live for Christ (2 Cor. 5:9) and not ourselves. Living for the goal of honoring Christ also means that one will live for others more than for himself. That is true in marriage (Eph. 5:22ff), for children (Eph. 6:1-3), for unbelievers (Mk. 10:45), as well as in the church among all believers. It is the mark of the believer to live to serve and please others more than himself. And that’s joy.

“Biblical self-denial means ‘Deny yourselves the lesser joys so you don’t lose the big ones.’ Which is the same as saying: *Really* pursue joy! Don’t settle for anything less than full and lasting joy.” [Piper, *Desiring God*.]

- ✓ We will use our Christian liberties well when we use them in ways that subordinate our personal desires to the desires and consciences of others. We should rather give up a right than lead someone to sin against their conscience through following our example (14:20-21).
- ✓ Remember: when we live for self, we do not live for the Lord and cannot please the Lord (Rom. 8:8).
- ✓ This was even Paul’s own example: 1 Cor. 10:32-33; Phil. 2:4.

## 2. Cultivate Unity by Working for the PLEASURE of Others (v. 2)

- Rather than pleasing himself (v. 1), the believer is to ***please his neighbor***. He is continuing to speak to those who are strong, and their responsibility:
  - ✓ He identifies himself with this group (just as he did with the strong in v. 1).
  - ✓ He is giving the positive admonition to the negative he gave to the strong in v. 1.
  - ✓ The instruction in this verse is parallel to the instruction to the strong in 14:13-23.
  - ✓ If we are “free” and enjoying liberties, we must always also be cognizant of these duties.
- The primary duty is to ***please his neighbor***. How? Paul identifies two ways to please our neighbors:
  - ✓ We give pleasure to our neighbor by working ***for his good***, i.e., for his spiritual benefit. As we make decisions, we should be asking “is it good for you?” rather than, “Is it good for me?” We want to look out for the interests of others — Phil. 2:3-4. That’s a good general principle — “what’s a good restaurant to help your diet?” “What is a good time to meet?” “How can I help you study?”

- ✓ But it is an even more important principle in relation to liberty issues — “what will benefit my brother’s obedience to Christ and submission to his conscience?” Or, “will my use of food or my practices of worship benefit my brother?” This is similar to Paul’s instruction in **1 Cor. 10:23-24**.
- ✓ We give pleasure to our neighbor by working **to his edification**. This is the same root as 1 Thess. 5:11 (last Sunday’s sermon). It’s a construction term that Paul applies to spiritual life — we want to “build up” (construct) spiritual lives — we don’t want to raze and destroy spiritual lives.
- ✓ This is virtually identical to what he said in **14:19**. It’s not only gracious, but it’s a demonstration of genuine love when we say, “I will give up my liberty if it will benefit you and keep you from sinning.”

### **3. Cultivate Unity by Following the EXAMPLE of Christ (v. 3)**

- The supreme example of One who did not live for His own pleasure but lived to build up others is **Christ**. In fact, notice that Paul doesn’t just give Christ as an example, but he begins v. 3 with the conjunction **for**, which means that he is providing the *reason* that we care most about others.
  - ✓ It is notable that in a book that is so much about the gospel, this is the first time Paul uses Christ as an example for us. He is the means of salvation and justification, but now He is an example.
  - ✓ It’s also notable that Paul uses the OT to demonstrate Christ’s example. Christ not only acts this way in the Gospels, but the OT foretold that the Messiah would be this way: the One who would redeem Israel was One who lived for the benefit of His redeemed people and not for His own desires.
  - ✓ This is also a reminder of the authority of the Word of God — Paul could certainly have gone to a well-known incident from Christ’s life; instead, he goes to the Bible — “For him the Bible ends all argument.” [Morris] The Bible makes the final and ultimate argument for Paul. (Which means that we should regularly — as you do — be asking “What does the Bible say...?”)
- The passage Paul quotes is **Psalm 69:9** — a song of David’s suffering and his prayer for rescue from his oppressors. Because he was zealous for God, he was suffering (**69:5, 7**) – even from his family (**69:8-9**).
  - ✓ Paul uses that psalm to indicate that the ultimate Davidic King suffered similarly — the hatred of men ultimately fell on Christ, even His earthly family and people (Israel). He willingly endured that hostility so that He might care for us and provide our salvation (**Heb. 12:2-3**).
  - ✓ Paul’s point is simple: “In the light of what Jesus has done, can the strong in Christ’s church insist on having their meat and the weak keep up their condemnation of their fellows?” [Morris]
  - ✓ Christ was concerned about corporate unity, not personal rights. Christ worked for spiritual growth of others not the preservation of His own personal privilege. (That’s why He left Heaven.)
  - ✓ We demonstrate our service of Christ and our following of Christ when we act similarly.
  - ✓ Philip Henry (Matthew’s father) tells us why it is worth following Christ:

“Are not we, the doers, weak and infirm, bent to backslide, unskillful in the word of righteousness, not only backward to but awkward in everything that is good? And have we not then great need of an example, one to go before us to show us how and which way? Our heavenly Father, who knows our frame, has provided for us accordingly. The whole Bible is a book of rules and examples, rules in the precepts, examples in the stories—both Old Testament and New—which are all to help our infirmities. And we should make use of them accordingly. But one example there is so in a special and peculiar manner, a pattern which in a special manner we are to take heed to, and that is the blessed Jesus...[Others are] but candles, at best but stars. He, the sun. Now as the sun exceeds and excels all other lights, so the blessed Jesus all other examples.” [Christ All in All]

- He is the example we need in all things, and He has come to provide our righteousness and be our example, so that we can honor the Lord who saves us by how we live.

#### 4. Cultivate Unity by Remembering the **HOPE** of Scripture (v. 4)

- The quotation of Psalm 69 reminds Paul to instruct his readers about how to use the OT — as instruction for how to persevere — how to live for God. It also is a reminder that it is not natural to want to live for God; we need help, and Scripture is that help that we need.
  - ✓ **Whatever was written in earlier times** refers to anything that was written in the OT.
  - ✓ And *everything* that was written in the OT is **for our instruction** — it’s for the benefit of *all of us*.
  - ✓ Not everything in the Bible has equal application for every circumstance (if I’m wrestling with a financial decision, Israel’s worship laws in Leviticus probably won’t be much help), but *all* the Bible has application and relevance to our lives. Cf. **2 Tim. 3:16-17**.
- Paul points to a particular use of the OT Scriptures — **so that...** (purpose statement) we would know the **perseverance and encouragement** that come through the Scriptures.
  - ✓ That is, the perseverance and encouragement of the OT saints who were written about in the OT (the Scriptures of which Paul was writing in that day) provide the hope for believers today as well (the same premise as in Heb. 11). We gain hope by looking backward at the examples of others.
  - ✓ Just as the OT saints persevered in obeying and following God, and as they were comforted by God, so we too can look at their example and find strength and courage to persevere and be comforted. The following verse makes clear that these attributes are gifts from God (through His Word).
- Further, as we look at the Scriptures and those who persevered we receive **hope**.
  - ✓ As we look at history and God’s faithfulness, we gain confidence in Him to trust Him today and tomorrow — “If He did that then, He can do it now...” (He restates this in **vv. 13, 33**).
  - ✓ Our hope is not our liberty now, but our Savior who sustains us (**12:12; 13:11-12**).

- The question is “how does this hope fit into Paul’s discussion about unity and liberty?”
  - ✓ Notice a couple of emphases in these verses:
    - The strong need to **bear** the weakness of the weak (v. 1) — sometimes walking alongside weak brothers is difficult and hard; it can be wearying (“Here we go again...”)
    - When we make intentional choices about how we might use (or give up) liberties for Christ, we will be mocked and perhaps persecuted (v. 3) — even as Christ was. The Christian life is costly.
    - When we face those difficulties, we might be tempted to give up and quit and the unity of the church could become fractured.
  - ✓ Paul is reminding us that when we make those sacrifices, our pursuit of unity will be worth it.
    - Christ is victorious and will preserve all His people (1 Thess. 5:11).
    - Christ will bring us home with all His promises of final redemption (8:18).
    - And the ultimate hope of the believer is the unity of the brotherhood in Heaven (14:15b).
  - ✓ Preserve the unity of the church body by pointing each other to the hope of final salvation.

## 5. Cultivate Unity by Heeding the PRAYER of Paul (vv. 5-6)

- These final two verses serve almost like a benediction to the section; it has been called a “prayer-wish.” It’s both a desire and something to do. This is Paul’s prayer and exhortation for the Romans as they work together despite diverse decisions on questions of liberty issues.
- There are four particular phrases of importance in this prayer:
  - ✓ **May the God who gives perseverance...** — our unity and our perseverance is a grace gift from God that comes to us through the ministry of Christ (2 Cor. 1:3ff).
  - ✓ **Grant you to be of the same mind** is a commitment to be single-minded in our relationships. We have one thought about our relationships — no matter how diverse we are in personal opinions and preferences, we are tied together through one common bond in Christ and we will treat each other with the dignity and kindness that is fitting of brotherly relationships.
  - ✓ **So that with one accord...with one voice** is another reminder of the necessity of harmonious speech and conduct. We are committed to each other (what a husband and wife might say about commitment to each other should also be repeated often in the church body).
  - ✓ **Glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus** reminds us of the priority of exalting God. Not only should my use of liberties facilitate the unity of the church, but my use of liberties should promote the revelation of God’s glory in the church and in the world. Like everything else, my liberties are ultimately for the glory of God — to helping people be happy and satisfied in God.
- Since this is Paul’s prayer, we can also say that this is God’s desire for us to do. If Paul would pray this for us, then we should pursue, heed, and cultivate the unity exhorted in this prayer.

**CONCLUSION:** I read a number of Scriptures at the beginning of the message emphasizing the unity of the church body; I omitted one passage from our Savior that is especially significant — **John 17:20-24**.

In Christ, we have liberty and freedom to exercise personal preference for things that were overtly proscribed for the people of God. That freedom is a joy and privilege. But there is something far more important than the freedom of what we might choose to eat or drink or when to worship — our unity with other believers who have made different choices than us. Personal freedoms are not essential; corporate unity *is* essential.

Our passage this morning has reminded us of that reality. And the words of Christ remind us of it as well. Christ died to make us one and bring us into unity with the Father. The Lord has been gracious to give us harmony and unity; let's make sure that we do not allow our own personal preferences and choices impede the corporate unity of this church body.

Because this does not come naturally, let's pray and ask God to continue to grant this grace to us...

**BENEDICTION:** **Romans 11:33-36**