



OUR MODEL FOR MINISTRY

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

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Romans 15:1-13

30th Message

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The apostle Paul's letter to the Romans details the marvelous story of God's transforming grace. As we have been discovering in our studies of this great book, Christians are to be God's instruments to penetrate the world with the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ. That is our mission: that people may see that Jesus Christ is the authentic voice of God to mankind; that in him rests the ultimate issue of human destiny, and in him we come face to face with all that is important in human affairs. It is a difficult mission. Having been on the other side of the fence, we know that worldlings live in confusion and blindness. But the strategy for accomplishing our mission has as much to do with our manner as it does our message.

The night before our Lord was crucified, he spent a lengthy time in prayer both for his disciples and for us. Here is part of what he prayed:

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, [that is us] that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (John 17:20-23, NIV)

The quality of our unity as Christians is what will either attract or repel the world.

The third verse of the great hymn, *Onward Christian Soldiers*, says:

Like a mighty army moves the church of God.
Brothers, we are treading where the saints have trod;
We are not divided, all one body we.
One in hope and doctrine, one in charity.

There is a parody of that verse that unfortunately often rings true, however:

Like a mighty turtle moves the church of God.
Brethren we are treading where we've always trod.
We are much divided; many bodies we;
Strong in truth and doctrine; weak in charity.

We are in the midst of Paul's detailed description of what it means for Christians to love one another. The example that he gives concerns two different groups of people in the church, whom he describes as "weak" and "strong." Certain Jewish members of the church in Rome who had always eaten kosher foods, and had

been meticulous in keeping the Sabbath, were having difficulty accepting their new Gentile brothers and sisters, who had no problem eating pork, and celebrating the resurrection of Christ on the first day of the week.

In this section therefore the apostle teaches Christians how to love each other in the midst of our diversity and appreciate and respect each other's differences. The issue here does not concern morality. Where Scripture is absolute, where truth is stated in an unmistakable way it is sinful for us to debate those issues. But there are all sorts of matters about which the Bible is not clear, and in these gray areas, Christians disagree.

In our text today, Paul will conclude his illustration by focusing on our model. Jesus Christ is the supreme example of one who lived for others rather than himself. We pick up the apostle's words in chapter 15.

Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification. (Rom 15:1-2, NASB)

Paul begins, "Now we who are strong..." This is the first time he refers to the "strong" by name. He has made frequent references in chapter 14 to the "weak," but now he not only identifies them, he includes himself as one of them. The "strong" man or woman, of course, is the one who has a broader and more Biblical understanding of his or her freedom in Christ. The natural response of people who are right is to win the argument and insist on their way, to wield their strength and crush the weak one. But the apostle's call here is for the strong to make some compensation for the weak, to give them slack and bear with their weaknesses.

Our call is to live lives that are other-centered, not self-centered. Paul says that the strong ought not to live to simply to please themselves. That is our problem, isn't it? In our fallen nature we are self-centered and self-seeking. It is natural for us to use our strength for our own advantage. But that's not God's way. In God's household, strength denotes obligation. That word "ought" comes from the same word that Paul uses in 13:8, where he instructs Christians to owe no one anything except to love one another. It isn't merely that we should act that way; we owe it to our brothers and sisters in Christ to forego our rights for them. If we can't behave like this, then we aren't as strong as we think.

We should not confuse this idea of pleasing our neighbor with Biblical warnings about man-pleasing. There is a negative kind of pleasing others that is really

self-centered — flattering them so that we can get something in return. Maybe that's why Paul qualifies the statement to please our neighbor with the clause, "for his good, to his edification." Instead of causing him to stumble or tearing him down, we are to build him up. Paul is speaking of the determined adjustment of our lifestyle to whatever will contribute to the spiritual good of our brother or sister.

Next, the apostle gives the theological foundation for his appeal. He holds up the example of Jesus, who is mentioned in almost every verse. Why should we live so as to please our neighbor and not ourselves?

For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on Me.' 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. (15:3-4)

The simple statement, "Christ did not please himself," summarizes the life of our Lord. John Stott writes: "It...sums up the meaning of the incarnation and the character of Christ's earthly life. Instead of pleasing himself, Jesus gave himself in the service of his Father and of human beings."¹ Paul expands on this in Philip-
pians:

Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5-8)

Jesus Christ is God! There is no question about it. Jesus manifested the character of God. He had all the attributes of God. He could have held on to his rights to act independently as God, but he didn't. Setting all that aside, he became dependent upon the Father in the same way that we are dependent upon him. He lived his entire earthly life in humble dependence upon his Father. That is why he could say things such as, "The words that I speak, the works that I do, they are of the Father. I can do nothing of myself" (John 8:29). "I always do what pleases him." And in John 4, "My food... is to do the will of him who sent me." Jesus never acted as God, although he is God. He always acted out of a sense of dependence upon God.

It is interesting that Paul does not refer to some incident from Jesus' earthly life to make his point. He quotes from Psalm 69, which describes the unjust, unreasonable sufferings of a righteous man. This verse is used a number of times in the New Testament to refer to Christ. Stott writes: "As an example of refusing to please himself, Christ so completely identified himself with the name and the will of his Father that the insults intended for God fell upon him."² And we are called to follow his example.

Having mentioned Christ's fulfillment of the Old Tes-

tament, in Psalm 69:9, Paul cannot resist adding, parenthetically, a word about the nature and purpose of the OT Scriptures and how helpful they are to us: "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." Remember, that is why the Scriptures are given — that through the written word we might see and hear the living Word. God continues to speak through what he has spoken.

Paul now returns to his main point, with a prayer.

Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (15:5-6)

These two verses, which are in the form of a benediction, are a prayer for unity. It's important to understand what kind of unity the apostle is talking about. When he says, "be of the same mind with one another," he is not suggesting that we think alike about everything. After all, his focus is to help us accept one another despite our differences.

The NIV translates the text this way, "May...God... give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus." The unity that Paul is praying for is not that we would all love the same things, but that we would all possess the same love. In the midst of all our diverse personalities, our differing gifts, our unique theological distinctives, Paul is praying that we should be unified in our love of Jesus and our focus on him. He prays not for uniformity, but for harmony.

A danger in evangelical circles is defining unity as a common set of beliefs. The Apostles Creed is a common body of belief, passed through the apostles. The second century document describes what the early church believed. It is the very core of faith, and it speaks mostly of the things of Christ. But Christians disagree in many other areas. We are all different. We worship in different ways. Charismatics, Baptists, Episcopalians, evangelical Catholics, all are different from one another. But there is a unity that our Lord has created which is a spiritual unity. Jesus said, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me; and you are in me; and we all love one another."

Suppose we could bring together Christians from different generations who have impacted the world for Christ: Augustine of Hippo from the fourth century; the saintly mystic and poet Bernard of Clairvaux from the tenth century; the peerless reformer John Calvin from the sixteenth century; from the eighteenth century would come John Wesley, the great Methodist advocate of free will and the evangelist George Whitefield; from the nineteenth century, Charles Spurgeon and D.L. Moody. These men would not be in unanimous agreement on very many things, but in the midst of all their diverse personalities, their gifts and theological distinctives, they would be unified in their love of Jesus and their

focus on him.

We are not called to think alike about everything: raising our children the same way, reading the same books, thinking alike politically, having the same hobbies. Unity is not loving the same things but possessing the same love.

That same mind to which Scripture calls us is the mind of Christ. That is the mind we are called to share, to give up our own rights and humbly care about the needs of others. This is the opposite of the selfish pursuit of our own interests, which only produces quarrels.

Harmony in diversity is the goal. The church is meant to be a symphony. But when everyone insists that his or her own particular role or emphasis is the only true one, and does whatever they want to do in spite of how it affects others, it becomes a cacophony. An orchestra made up of musicians all playing the same instrument and the same notes would never produce the beautiful chords that strike our hearts so deeply. The same is true of God's congregational orchestra. It needs all the different instruments playing the full score to produce the rich, harmonious sound that is pleasing to his ears.

That is why Paul concludes by saying that the result of our unity will be worship: "so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Unless there is unity, our worship will not be what it is meant to be. We ruin our worship when we stubbornly refuse to give up our rights. As the psalmist says, "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!"

Paul concludes this long illustration of what it means to love one another in the same way he began it, with a call to acceptance.

Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. (15:7)

In 14:1, the apostle said, "accept the one who is weak in faith." Here he says, "accept one another." Both appeals are based on God's acceptance of us. Paul reminds us that the place to begin is not by gritting our teeth and determining to act lovingly. Love comes naturally out of a heart that is conscious of being loved. When Jesus had difficulty loving his men he didn't grit his teeth and try to be nice. He began to reflect on how the Father loved him, how wonderful it was to be approved and loved of God. He strengthened and steadied himself with the fact that the Father cherished him.

It is the same for us. The way to love other people is to remind yourself of how much God loves you. When someone irritates you, review Christ's love for you. Stop and think of what the Lord did for you. He gave up his life for you. Think of how patient he is with you; how much he cares for you; how patient he is with your failures; how he supports and acknowledges you as one of his own; how he tenderly provides for you. It is that

wellspring of love that will enable you to love others. You can't love from a vacuum. We love, John says in his first letter, because God first loved us.

Again, this final exhortation is backed by the example of Christ, who has accepted us, not strong and weak now, but Jew and Gentile:

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, 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.' Again he says, 'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people.' And again, 'Praise the LORD all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise Him.' 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.' 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. (15:8-13)

Here Paul reviews all that God has done for us. To the Jews in Rome, he says, in effect, "Christ became a servant of the Jews, but not because you particular Jews in Rome were attractive or worthwhile or had anything going for you. It is because he made promises to the patriarchs. So you have benefited because he keeps his promises." To the Gentiles, he says, "You may glorify God for his mercy. You don't deserve anything you have received, but a merciful God has included you as well." And he quotes four OT passages, one from the Law, one from the Prophets, and two from the Writings, the three divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures, to show God's intention to include both Jews and Gentiles in this Messianic community. Think of the amazing diversity of the Jews and Gentiles whom Christ has accepted!

Jesus desires that the world may be persuaded. He longs for them to know him. But we need to remember that our mission is not merely one of proclamation. It is not only verbal, it is visible. It is relational as well as audible. Jesus said this to his disciples: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Evangelism is a community act. It is the proclamation of the church's relationships as well as its convictions. The greatest barriers to effective evangelism are not outdated methods or inadequate presentations of the gospel. The barriers are our insensitivities, gossip, jealousy, backbiting and bitterness, our unforgiving spirits, self-absorption and greed.

1. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 369.
2. Stott, *Romans*, 370.

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