Following Jesus
Romans 15:1-13

Brief Comments

Introduction: A new kind of community is the theme of Romans 12:1-15:13. Leading up to this passage, Paul has identified four traits for this new kind of community including spiritual worship (12:1-8), authentic love (12:9-21), citizenship (13:1-14), and unity (14:1-23). The fifth and final characteristic of this new kind of community is following Jesus (15:1-13).

The Christian life is really about following Jesus. Jesus was the original person for “Just do it.” So, if Jesus studied/taught the Word, worshipped, prayed, discipled, served, evangelized, and fasted, then we should follow Jesus and “just do it.”

Following Jesus also includes developing Christ-like characteristics such as grace, holiness, love, mercy, justice, compassion, joy, peace, goodness, faithfulness, perseverance, humility, patience, truthfulness, and forgiveness.

Romans 15:1-13 is about following Jesus in light of pursuing unity. Thus, these verses continue the theme of unity began in Romans 14. Paul makes two points in this passage. First, followers of Jesus don’t please ourselves (15:1-6). Second, followers of Jesus welcome one another (15:7-13).

Don’t Please Ourselves (15:1-6)

15:1-2: When we choose to not please ourselves, then we put others first. First, the strong/mature in faith have an obligation (duty, responsibility) “to bear” (like carrying a burden; cf. Galatians 6:2) the “failings of the weak” (failings refer to issues of consciences highlighted in chapter 14: meat, holy days, drinking wine).

Second, the strong have an obligation to not please themselves and limit their freedom. According to Paul, it’s “good” when the strong/mature limit their freedom because it will not cause their brothers/sisters to stumble. Also, this disagreement can “build” and edify the weaker/younger in faith because it provides an opportunity to study the Scriptures in order to understand our freedom in Christ.

We often equate Christian maturity with knowledge and skills, but here Paul likens it to humility and pleasing our brothers/sisters in the Lord.
15:3: Paul then illustrates the idea of not pleasing ourselves with Jesus’ example (see Philippians 2:5-11 where Jesus’ humility is highlighted) by citing Psalm 69:9. In its historical context, David was claiming that those who are against God are also now against him.

By applying this verse to Jesus, Paul was saying that God’s enemies were now against Jesus. They insulted him. They rejected him. They scorned him. In the midst of great sorrow and pain, Jesus could have pleased himself and taken the “easy way” out.

But Jesus chose to please his Father (John 4:34; 6:38; 8:29; cf. Garden of Gethsemane: Matthew 26:36-46) and not please himself. His obedience to the Father ultimately led to the cross and our salvation. Jesus also pleased others by serving (sometimes) to the point of exhaustion (sleeping in the boat: Mark 4:35-41).

Jesus was not seeking to please and live for himself, but rather, he came to serve others and give his life for us (Mark 10:45). Hughes summarizes: “For Paul, the fact that Christ did not please himself has everything to do with our deferring to one another for the sake of Christian unity.” (271)

15:4-6: “Written in former days” is a reference to Israel’s history. One of the purposes of the Old Testament (Scripture at the time of Paul’s letter) is “instruction” (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16 lists four purposes: teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness). God’s Word produces encouragement and endurance in our Christian life.

Taken together, encouragement and endurance then produce hope. Hope is not something that we wish for. Hope in the biblical sense is something that we are confident about, something that we are convinced or feel certain that it will come to pass.

Pate interprets the words “endurance” and “encouragement” in the context of Israel’s sin/exile and restoration (encouragement): “I suggest that Paul has the story of Israel in mind (cf. again 1 Corinthians 10-11): Israel’s sin and exile (endurance) will give away to restoration (encouragement, comfort).” (280)

It’s not only the Jews who were once in spiritual exile, but the Gentiles (in general, Old Testament) were also in spiritual exile. But God is the God of endurance (sin/exile of Jews and Gentiles) and comfort (restoration of Jews and Gentiles). He is sovereign over our endurance and comfort.

This comfort/restoration of Jews and Gentiles has been established in Christ (15:5 in accord with Christ Jesus). In response to this comfort/restoration, Paul exhorts the strong and weak to pursue “harmony” in order to “glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (15:6)
Isn't this amazing? Following Jesus' example of not pleasing himself (and pleasing others) not only brings harmony/unity to the body of Christ, but it will bring glory to God. Thus, pursuing unity (and limiting our freedom) is worth our sacrifice because it's all for God's glory.

Welcome One Another (15:7-13)

15:7: Christians should “welcome one another” in the same way that “Christ has welcomed” us. Jesus' welcoming of us is significant for three reasons. First, Jesus welcomes us despite our sin, rebellion, pride, selfishness, fears, greed, bitterness, insecurities, and disobedience. Thus, Jesus' welcoming of us demonstrates his grace, compassion, mercy, love, and perseverance toward us.

Who is God asking us to welcome despite their shortcoming? Ask God to give you grace, compassion, mercy, love, and perseverance toward others who need to be welcomed in your family, church, school, work, and neighborhood.

Second, Jesus welcomes us in order to break down the barriers to community. Regarding our salvation in Christ, Galatians 3:28 states: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

When Jesus welcomed us by saving, redeeming, reconciling, and forgiving us, he was also breaking down different kinds of barriers to community:

- Religious: Jews and Greeks (Gentiles)
- Social: Jews and Greeks (Gentiles)
- Economic: Slave and Free
- Gender: Male and Female

What kind of barriers is God asking you to break by welcoming others? How will you begin to welcome those in your family, at church, at school, at work, and in your neighborhood?

Third, Jesus welcomes us “for the glory of God.” God is glorified because He has saved, redeemed, reconciled, and forgiven us. God is glorified because unity in the body of Christ is a reflection of the Father, Son, and Spirit's unity. God is glorified because the barriers broken (religious, social, economic, gender) demonstrate the gospel’s impact on society.

15:8: As a servant of God, Jesus came to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45; cf. servant: John 13:1-17; Philippians 2:5-11). In general, we may view his sacrifice in two ways in relation to the Jews (faithfulness) and Gentiles (mercy). For the Jews, God was faithful to His promises to the patriarchs of the Old Testament (e.g., Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David) that were fulfilled in Christ.

15:9: Because the Gentiles were not direct recipients of these promises of salvation (no Gentile patriarchs and
prophets), Paul notes that they were saved by God’s mercy. While they didn’t receive direct promises like the Jews, Paul makes it clear that God’s plan of salvation included them in the Old Testament.

In support, he cites four Old Testament passages in 15:9-12 that highlight the future unity of Jews and Gentiles in light of their salvation and worship. Psalm 18:49 (cf. 2 Samuel 22:50) is the first quote (Romans 15:9). In this verse, David is glorifying God for his victory over the Gentiles.

Paul “spiritualizes” the meaning when applying it to the Gentiles. Jesus conquered the Gentiles and was victorious over them through his death and resurrection. As a result, God shall be praised “among” the Gentiles because He has welcomed (saved) them as part of His people.

15:10-12: The second quote (Romans 15:10) is from Deuteronomy 32:43 (ESV: O heavens); Moses exhorted the Gentiles to praise God for His victory. Paul applies this verse to the Gentiles—as a call for Gentiles to rejoice with the Jews because of their victory in Christ. This victory in Christ welcomes them into the body of Christ and unites them with their Jewish brothers and sisters.

Psalm 117:1 is the third quote (Romans 15:11). The psalmist calls on “all nations” and “all peoples” to worship God. Paul uses this verse to exhort Gentiles to glorify God. Thus, Jesus welcomes Gentiles into the body of Christ for worship.

Paul’s fourth quote (Romans 15:12) is from Isaiah 11:10. This is a prophecy about Jesus, who will “rule the Gentiles” (Lord of the nations and personal lives) and in whom the Gentiles will “hope” (because Jesus alone can save us from our sins). Jesus welcomes the Gentiles into the body of Christ for lordship and hope.

By citing Moses (Deuteronomy 32:43), Isaiah (11:10), and David (Psalm 18:49; 117:1), Paul appealed to the threefold division of the Old Testament (law, prophets, writings). Paul is saying that the Old Testament points to the Gentiles as being part of God’s plan of salvation. As a fulfilment of the Old Testament, Jesus has welcomed the Gentiles into the body of Christ and has broken down the barriers!

15:13: As noted earlier, hope is having a certainty and strong confidence that a particular belief is certainly true. Paul concludes this section with a blessing for God’s hope—for us to be filled “with all joy and peace.” Because Jesus has welcomed us into the body of Christ, we can experience God’s joy and peace through the Spirit’s presence and power (Galatians 5:22-23).

Reflection
1. What are the “obligations” of the strong?

2. How is Christ an example of not pleasing himself? How should his example impact us in light of engaging our
different communities? (family, church, school, work, neighborhood, etc.)

3. It’s possible that endurance and encouragement are used in two different ways in 15:4-5. Explain.

4. Read 15:6-7. The ultimate purpose of pursuing unity is God’s glory. Why is this truth significant?

5. Concerning salvation (15:8-9), Jews praise God for His faithfulness and Gentiles praise God for His mercy. Why do you think Paul made these distinctions? Discuss.


7. What kind of barriers have been “broken down” in light of Jesus welcoming us? (Galatians 3:28) Following Jesus means welcoming others. Who will you welcome this week? Share.