

## **WHEN CHRISTIANS DISAGREE, PART 3**

### **Romans 15:1–13**

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This is the third of a series of messages from Romans 14 and 15 on “When Christians Disagree.” Paul is concluding this particular section of the letter. As we open chapter 15, we find these words: “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.’ For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written: ‘Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name.’ Again, it says, ‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.’ And again, ‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples.’ And again, Isaiah says, ‘The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him.’ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” Romans 15:1–13 (NIV).

We have looked in previous times at these expressions, “the strong” and “the weak.” That is the theme that runs throughout Romans 14 and 15. I want to add, though, today two other words at the start. When you bend the word “strong” out of the biblical perspective, you come out with what I would call a libertarian, a person who advocates liberty at the cost of all law. He might be

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called an anti-law kind of person. If you bend the weak and drive it to an extreme beyond what is being talked about by Paul, you come up with a legalist. It's possible, within the body of Christ, for there to be four groups of people mingling side by side: the strong, the weak, the libertarian and the legalist. But I want to share a few words that will help us discern, hopefully, ourselves on this rather than discerning someone else. For our purpose is not to look around and say, "Who's the strong, the weak, the legalist, the libertarian in our midst?"

The source of authority is a key way of discerning one from the other. For the strong Christian, the source of authority is the Scripture and the example of the Lord. This person is persuaded in the Lord Jesus of doctrine and of conduct. And does not take as their source of authority the traditions of people. They're very aware of those traditions and, if necessary, will accommodate their behavior to fit people who depend upon traditions for support. But for themselves, as Paul says, "I am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean of itself" (see Romans 14:14). He establishes his doctrine from the standpoint of what is written in the Scripture and what is proclaimed by the Lord.

The weaker Christian, however, depends on their source of authority not only from the Scripture, but also tradition—what has come down to them through other believers. Perhaps, also, the weak Christian relies on personalities which strongly affect them. So it's not only, "What does the Lord say?" But, "What does Pastor, or so-and-so say?" Or what does, "Evangelist or Traveling Teacher 'Blank' say?" It's not only the Lord, but it's also that particular spiritual body of tradition which we have grown up with. We become very dependent on that.

The libertarian, however, because he throws aside all law and says all things are lawful, really is doing away with the Scripture and is relying upon self. This is the cry of the situational ethicist of our day, the person who says, "It all depends on the immediate context of whether it's right or wrong. If it feels good and seems to be the right thing, it's ok to proceed."

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The legalist, however, bases their source of authority in a false understanding of the Scripture and Christ. The legalist can quote Scripture like crazy. I think, for example, of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, where they were debating the question of whether or not Gentiles should be circumcised before they are accepted as full-fledged members of the Christian faith. Imagine an issue being that important that the first Church council was held concerning it.

But there were those in that debate that could quote far more preponderance of text supporting their view that a person must be circumcised than there were persons who could quote opposite texts. The difference was not the weight of material you could throw, but the right understanding of how the Lord himself had interpreted and understood the Old Testament Scripture. A legalist is often great at quoting Scripture, but most frequently has the danger of not understanding the nature of Scripture. Therefore, misapplies it quite frequently.

How about the relationship to others in the Body? The strong is motivated by love and, therefore, is interdependent with other persons in the Body. The strong person that's not dependent and says, "I can get by on my own; I don't need the body of Christ," he's not an independent person, and is not a dependent person. He's saying, "If so-and-so crashes in their Christian walk, I'm not sure my faith will hold either." There is a level of interdependence which says, "We need to rely upon one another." As Paul says, bear one another's burdens. As James says, confess to one another our weaknesses and our faults.

The weak person, however, because they're insecure in the faith, is dependent upon other believers. Sometimes, dependent upon circumstances. So that when everything is going well, it looks like their faith is going well and all is secure. But when things begin coming unraveled, weakness, because it is there, begins to cause a questioning as of the solidity of one's faith.

When a person has really looked to another individual Christian for support and for example, when that example in any way has a tarnish to their image, it can cause the weak to really have

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problems.

A noted Christian author and speaker was ministering to some younger Christians. Evidently, these younger Christians had this particular person set up on a real high pedestal. One day, she made some comment about being impatient about some activity that she had to do, and she was very frustrated with that impatience. One of the persons who really looked to her for support and modeling and leadership and the like expressed to her later that that word was a real freeing word for her. Because she thought the ideal Christian—which this gal was—was without fault so, therefore, she was heavily condemning herself all the time because she wasn't on the perfect plain, as the other believer. When the strong believer said, "On occasion, I get frustrated too," it allowed the weaker believer to say, "It must be ok to confess these things, if you have a weakness."

The Lord doesn't want you to continue forever as a weak believer. If your source of security is in the example or teaching of some other believer, by all means work on getting that transferred to the Lord Jesus Christ himself so that your faith and solidity in the body of Christ doesn't depend upon what someone else is doing.

The libertarian, however, as they relate to other believers, is puffed up with pride. Therefore, is independent of other believers. They can go their own way.

The legalist, however, is both independent and dependent. In some ways, the legalist is very dependent and ready to read everybody else out of the faith who doesn't see things the way he particularly sees them. The legalist tends to pass judgment on others. But the legalist also can be very dependent because the legalist depends on converting others to his particular viewpoint.

That's the problem Paul faces in the Galatian letters with those who would come in and prey upon the weak Christians for converts. Paul wants us to obviously come to the position of having our source of authority in the Scripture and the Lord.

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One of the difficulties, I think, that goes with being a weak Christian, to look at it again for another moment, is that the weak Christian often is very aware of the fact that in order to get into the Kingdom, we need the exercise of God's grace. It is God's grace that saves us. So at the outset is God's grace. And the weak believer is also very much aware that, at the end, it's going to be God's grace that is going to take us into the eternal presence of God. It is God's grace by which we're going to hear those words, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:23). But the weak Christian has a problem between the beginning and the end. He gets in by grace, and he finishes by grace, but does he have grace in between? Often, the weak Christian begins to believe grace isn't there. It's effort. It's striving. It's trying your hardest and knocking yourself out for God. And if, in any way, you let down or fail, God is ready to zap you at that particular moment.

But I want to tell you that the strong believer understands that it's grace all the way through. And the strong believer, on the other hand, never confuses grace with an attitude that allows them to go out and do anything and become a lawless type of person. But we live as the body of Christ in the midst of grace.

Paul has really taken some time in these two chapters to talk about the relationship of the strong to the weak. Remember the temptation of the strong is to despise, or ridicule, the weak because all of their hang-ups can be an irritation. And the temptation of the weak is to condemn the strong and pass judgment on him. "You're going to that place. You're wearing that particular thing. You're intaking or outtaking that particular thing." That is disturbing to the weak, so their tendency is to pass judgment. Or, "You don't worship the way we worship at the church I was saved in? You must not be really spiritual, or all the way in," or something like that. Inevitably, the weak are passing judgment or condemnation.

So Paul is taking these two chapters to lay down some principles of relationship. We really can't

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get into chapter 15 without, just for a moment, connecting them. Because Paul didn't write chapter 14 then say, "Now what am I going to say in chapter 15?" It's all one flowing letter, without chapter and verse clarifications, when he initially addressed it. He said to the weak and the strong that God has welcomed each of them.

He said each of them is the Lord's servant and, therefore, one is not at liberty to correct someone else's employee. He has said that both of them can be right. The person who eats the salad, if he says grace before the meal and blesses it, and the person who sits down and eats the steak and blesses it. Both of them are giving thanks and glory to God, and both of them can be right—even though one is a vegetarian and one is not. Both come in under the Lord's judgment. Therefore, both must reckon with the fact that, personally, they will stand and answer to God for their conduct.

Paul says in chapter 14 that the strong are not to trip or trap the weak. They're not to lay stumbling blocks or traps into which the weak fall and become unraveled. And he says the strong are to promote the welfare, or the upbuilding, of Christ's Body. The next thing that Paul says about the relationship between the strong and the weak is found in chapter 15, verses 1 through 5, where he indicates that the strong are to shoulder the weaknesses of the weak.

The text specifically says, "We who are strong ought to..." That's an obligation, something we owe. Not, "I *hope* you'll do this." But it's a strong word that indicates we *must* do this.

#### **I. "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak" (Romans 15:1).**

The literal way to read this is: "We who are strong ought to shoulder the weaknesses of the weak."

The word that's used here for "to bear with the failings of the weak" sometimes we mistakenly understand this as we ought to put up with the weak brother, with all his tighter scruples, even though we'll have to suffer and grit our teeth a little bit. We'll put up with our brother or sister's

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limitations. This is not, however, the thought of Paul. The word that he's using here for "to bear" is the same word which Jesus uses when He tells us to bear our cross. It is to carry. It is to literally put that person on our shoulder and support them. Since the weak are looking to other believers for their example, one of the things the strong owes to the weak is to be that good example. As that weak person gradually goes through the transfer of faith in someone else to real solid faith in Christ, we ought to bear, to shoulder, this responsibility.

I'm reminded of the story of the little boy who was seen carrying his brother. The brother appeared to be almost as big as he was. A person came up to the little boy and said, "Isn't he heavy?" And he said, "Oh, no! He's my brother!"

This pretty well expresses the thought of what Paul is saying here—that when we have that family connection with one another, we don't really mind limiting our own freedom in order to be a support to someone else who's having to struggle in that area of the faith.

I'm struck with how what Paul is saying here still has relevance. It even came up in a "Dear Abby" column this week in the *LA Times*. I thought I'd read it because it's really out of Romans 14 and 15. "We were three girls brought up in a strict Jewish home, so we had never had ham, bacon, or pork in our house. Now that we are all grown up and married, none of us observes the dietary customs. But our parents still do. My oldest sister has a beautiful home. When she has Mama and Papa over, she serves them a kosher dinner, but she always puts a big pork roast on the table for everyone else. Mama and Papa have never said anything, but I know they are hurt. I once told my sister I thought she was out of line to put pork on the table with our folks here. She said, 'We have pork in this house and they know it, so why be a hypocrite? Besides, in my home I'll serve whatever I like.' I still think my sister is wrong. Or am I?" Abby writes back, and it's striking how Abby writes exactly what I think Paul would write: "Your sister is not only wrong, but she's childish, disrespectful, and mean. She's trying to show contempt for the old traditions,

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and at the same time let Mama and Papa know that she's her own boss now and can do as she pleases. It is true that she can, but she doesn't have to hit them over the head with the pork roast to make her point."

That's really the whole question Paul is getting at here in Romans 14 and 15. Gentile believers do not need to display their freedom in such a way as to offend their Jewish fellow believers. Granted, it's not going to be offensive to the Jewish believers if the Gentiles go ahead and state their theology. That's what Paul does. He says, "I'm persuaded that all foods are clean" (see Romans 14:14). But having done that, he doesn't haul the pork roast out on the table and hit them over the head with it. It's a certain kind of condescension—maybe that's a bad word—consideration, that's there of the strong for the weak. A shouldering of the limitation of the weak and loving them because they're in Christ's Body.

A. Paul says there's some resources that are available to the strong for the purposes of shouldering the weaknesses of the weak. He points in verse 3 of chapter 15, to the example of Christ, how Christ did not please himself. We know that Christ, while He did not please himself, on the other hand, He didn't please everyone. So to be a pleaser of others doesn't mean you've got to please everyone. If you please everyone, you'll go crazy because you'll find that you can't please everyone. The Lord offended people at times when He, for example, broke the traditions of the Sabbath. When it became a point at which it related to the doctrine of salvation and relationship to God, He was willing to offend. The Lord also, sometimes in His ministry, didn't please anybody at all. Not only were there occasions when He didn't please everyone, there were occasions He didn't please anyone. On the way to the cross. That wasn't pleasing to anyone. The disciples were trying to keep Him away from this course of action.

But one thing can be said for the Lord. That is, that He never acted selfishly. He always acted in His Father's interest and the interest of His own. It is this example that Paul points to by quoting

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Psalm 69:9. The Lord did not live for himself. He took the reproaches that people wanted to give God. He shouldered them himself. He could have chosen an easier path, but He didn't.

This is the kind of motivation that Paul uses, interestingly enough, in the Philippian letter, when he's urging that church to have peace, especially two gals in the church that are at odds with one another. He says in Philippians 2: "Let this mind dwell in us which was also in Christ Jesus."

The mind of servanthood and humility. So Paul is not afraid at all to point us to the example of Christ, showing us that we need to bear one another up.

**B.** Paul then, in verse 4, shows us that in addition to the resources of the example of Christ which motivates us to serve one another, the Scriptures also are an encouragement. "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction." Paul goes into this because he's just quoted Psalm 69:9 and pointed to Christ. He says, "It's my liberty to refer to the Old Testament Scriptures." That's all he had at this point, because they were not written just for the people then; they were written for us now. It's through reading the Scriptures that we can have steadfastness and encouragement—two of my favorite words. "Steadfastness," which literally means "to remain under." To take the pressure, to stay under the heat, the adversity, the trial. And "encouragement," "one called alongside to help."

This verse, that the Scriptures are written for are steadfastness and for our encouragement, reminds us of the poster of a cat that was chinning himself on a bar. The motto underneath was, "Hang in there, baby!" That's essentially what the Scriptures keep telling us when we're going through a time of trial.

Why were the Scriptures written? In order to give us an example of how other people had suffered and gone through it and God had been with them, and they made it through. So we go to the Old Testament text, as Paul would have, and see the example of persons like Joseph. We see the prophecies, which pointed to the Lord. We see the example of suffering, like as is in the

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character of Job. The Scriptures encourage us and say to us that in the midst of our trials, “God is going to establish us.” That if we’ll act righteously with God’s cause in mind and not act selfishly, God will bring us through. So Paul is saying that Scriptures teach us to hang in there.

**C.** The third thing that Paul says gives us the resource to really shoulder the weakness of one another is the blessing of praying. Paul then breathes a prayer for these Roman saints, that the God of steadfastness and encouragement will grant them to live in such harmony with one another that with one voice they may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He wants these believers not to be glorifying with two voices—the weaker Christian meeting in his assembly and praising the Lord, and the stronger Christian meeting in theirs so the two voices are going to heaven. He wants them to merge, to be one together in their tribute to the Lord.

Believers that do pray together really do stay together. If believers do not pray together, then the glue which God really has appointed to unite believers is not there. When we come across a weaker or stronger brother, we can find that we can sit down together and talk and let the Scriptures be our encouragement and Christ be our example. We can close that time with praying together. That is a bond that unites us and is greater than our differences.

Finally Paul, in his admonitions to the strong related to the weak, closes this section in verses 7-13 by again saying as he did at the beginning that:

### **II. We are to welcome one another, for Christ has welcomed us.**

He points to the example that the Lord brought into His Church, the Jew and the Gentile. That for a time He became a servant to those who were of the circumcision. That is, Christ became a Jew in order to reach them. But His purpose in becoming a Jew was that ultimately, from the Jews, He could reach the Gentiles. So the Church is made up, Paul says, of both the Jews and the Gentiles. Both of whom promote and proclaim God’s glory. Christ did less at first in order to do more in the end. He did not go to the major cities of the world. He only went to His own home,

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and His ministry was limited to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He did less at first. But by doing less at first, in the end He did more. Because it was in doing that solid plowing and deep ministry that the people who were going to carry the gospel were trained to ultimately go to the ends of the earth. So the Lord sees His Church as both Jews and Gentiles worshiping together. When the Lord puts His Church into existence, He doesn't say: "I want you because you have certain racial characteristics, or certain national background, or certain language that I like. Therefore, I will select you out, and you're My Church."

But He looks at the whole stream of mankind. God has put His whole Body together from persons in the world. When He calls His Church into being, He doesn't do it selectively. In fact, the Church is like being born. We didn't select which family we were going to be in. We found we had brothers and sisters, and like it or not, they were there. They may have come after us. They may have been there before us. We didn't have a say in the matter. We're put in the family we were put into. And this is what the Lord is saying about the Church. Sometimes people don't like this in the body of Christ. They say, "I don't want to be with these people, God, that you have called!" Whether you like it or not, you're in the stream of mankind. You're no special person at all. You can't get out from that and be superior. God sees the whole stream of humanity as one.

Within the stream of humanity, it's amazing what happens. The young and the old, the black and the white, the Jew and the Arab, all are seen as part of the family of God. This world, out of which He's calling us to be His unique Church bonded together—not by virtue of our education, not by virtue of our racial or national backgrounds, not by virtue of even our denomination heritage or the like. But bonded together by virtue of one Lord, one Spirit, one faith, one baptism.

Paul is saying this about the Roman church here that was full of Jew and Gentile. He points to

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the Old Testament prophecies. Paul has a habit of pulling together a whole string of prophecies from the Old Testament and putting them under one stream of thought. He's saying, as he strings together words from the Psalms, the Law, and the Prophets, that it was prophesied that the Messiah would take His place with the Gentiles and praise God. Therefore, verse 9 is really the picture of the Messiah worshipping God in the congregation of the Gentiles. It's the quotation from Deuteronomy 32:43. "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people," constitutes just about the last words of Moses' song to his nation when he is concluding his time of ministry before his death. He looks ahead and prophesies that the Gentiles will rejoice with God's people, the people of Israel.

Psalms 117:1 is a quotation in verse 11. It's the shortest Psalm in the Bible, the shortest chapter. Yet in that shortest chapter, Paul remembers it as saying the Gentiles are going to praise the Lord. He shows, in quoting Isaiah 11:10 in chapter 15 of Romans, that the Old Testament had anticipated that the Messiah would rule over the Gentiles.

So the Lord is bringing about the unity in His Church. Paul then closes this section with a prayer. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

This raises the question of who is filling our life, and what is filling our life? What, evidently, has been filling some of the lives in the Roman church had been their divergences one from another. The issues over which they were divided—the matter of keeping days, the matter of eating certain kinds of food. Paul is saying, "That's not what is to dominate us." Not only that, I think we can go beyond that and say our failures aren't to dominate are life. Nor are the circumstances of life are to be such, that we allow them to dominate us in such a way that we become filled with the depression, and the adversity that circumstances can sometimes bring upon us. But if we look to the Lord and see Him as the God of hope, the one who brings us

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through, then we're going to let him fill our life. Whenever the Lord fills our life, what does He fill us with? Does He make us better people or not? Obviously, He makes us better. He is the God of joy and the God of peace. When the Holy Spirit pours His life into ours, there comes that settling of joy and peace in our lives which then makes it possible for us to abound in hope—even abounding in hope in the most difficult of moments.

That is why the Lord, I think, as He goes to the cross could yet rejoice. Because He is filled with the promise of the God of hope, who has given Him joy and peace in the midst of His difficult travail. His anchor is not depressing circumstance of the cross, so as to let that experience of the cross loosen His grasp of the reality of God's presence. But His anchor, His security, His knowledge that He has of the Father himself, who gives Him context and ability to go through the most difficult experience possible.

### **Closing Prayer**

We want to thank You, Lord, today for hearing this Word once more, seeing that it has come into our lives to free us from prejudice toward other believers. That it has helped us get a clearer grasp of who we are. In this world, at this time especially as we take communion, our thoughts become global and worldwide as we think of Your Body universally being gathered around the table. There are parts of Your Body today that are very broken and very divided. Animosity exists. Lord, let the message of reconciliation which we have experienced as a people on the local level, in which other local bodies are experiencing now all over the world, just be a positive seed of renewal and change in Your Church all over the world. That wherever Your Body is found, in any country, in any city, that there will be a testimony that, "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, that you have love one for another" (John 13:34).

Lord, within our own church body, we discern and understand that there are those who have recently come to You and yet are weak in faith. Who look to others for an example, and when

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that person fails to be the example that they expect, are very tossed about and driven in their faith. So Lord, I pray for those who are stronger in this body, that all of us would be very sensitive to one another. Without having guilt or condemnation put on us, nevertheless, really shoulder the responsibilities that come with being an example. Those of us who are weak, we pray, Lord, that our faith these days would become more and more rooted in You, so less and less we look to others as the means by which we know we're in the faith. But that we transfer our gaze and our standing to You. So that our faith can be so strong in You, that even though the world would be removed, yet we will put our trust in You. Though circumstances would turn away and every friend fail us, yet our faith is rooted and deepened in You. Lord, give us renewal today as we take this cup and this bread.

There may be some in our midst who have felt estranged, separated from You. Separated from Your people, Your Body. In this act of giving the bread and the cup today, You're extending Your grace once more to all of our lives and letting us know how much You welcome us to this event. How much You invite us to be a part of Your company of grace today. And let there be a real time of feeling that we belong on the part of all of us who worship. Let none of us who take today really wonder if we're worthy. We all know that without You, we're unworthy. We all know that because You gave your life willingly and loved us so much, You made us worthy. So we take because we're Your invited guests today. It would be an insult to the host to decline a meal which You prepared. How unlikely, if we were invited to someone's home and they prepared a meal for us, we'd sit there and say, "I'm unworthy to take the meal. I don't think I ought to eat at Your lovely table of the beautiful food which you prepared, because I'm so unworthy." The fact is, You thought enough of us that You invited us to the table. You said, "Come." So here we are Lord. We've shown up today at Your table. All You've asked us to do in coming is to believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, that You are the One who

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forgives our sins and heals all our iniquities. So Lord, we just come to this table. We gather and say, “We don’t understand how we got there.” We look around at the table and may not understand how some other people got here. But we know that You’ve called us here. So we’re invited to partake, to have fellowship with You. Because it’s You who said, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man will open the door I will come in and I will sup with him and he with Me.” So once You enter into our life, Lord, You prepare a table. Let this time be a time of being drawn into Your presence, feeling the warmth of Your life touching ours. We ask in Your Name. Amen.