

Lesson 16

Chapter Fifteen

We might have the right to do something, but if it is not “helpful” to our brother we must not do it.

Bearing With the Weak Concluded (15:1-7)

As is often the case, the chapter divisions we find in our modern Bibles (which are the work of man and not the revelation of God¹) may break a section of Scripture in the middle of a thought. In our text the first verses of chapter fifteen continue the theme introduced in the previous chapter.

After laying down the principle of patience with the one “weak in the faith” particularly as it applies to the eating of meats, he commands, **we then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples** (“weaknesses” [NASB], “infirmities” [KJV, ASV]), **of the weak, and not to please ourselves** (15:1). Paul pictures the reservations that the new convert would have regarding diet as a “weakness” that mature Christians must understand, and bear with

rather than choosing simply to “please themselves.” He expands this to say, **let each**

of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification (15:2). “Please” here is translated from the Gr. word *areskō* which Thayer explains to mean—“to accommodate one’s self to the opinions, desires, and interests of others.” This is not compromising truth but yielding to another in matters of liberty, judgment, or opinion. In the same context in his first letter to the Corinthians he declares, “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify” (1 Cor. 10:23). We might have the right to do something but if it is not “helpful” to others or fails to “edify” them we must not do it.

Even Christ did not come to this world for the purpose of self-gratification (15:3a). Paul, quoting from Psalm 69:9, explains that Christ received **reproaches** (15:3b). Throughout this book, Paul has quoted from the Old Testament. As if to clarify why such things are of value, he explains, **for whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope** (15:4). While modern man is no longer under Mosaic Law, it is a mistake to imagine that there is no reason to read and study from the Old Testament. These things remain to offer us “learning.” Paul told the Corinthians these things “became our examples” (1 Cor. 10:6, 11). Christians should continue to study from the Old Testament and glean all that we can to aid in our understanding of the New Covenant.

Paul’s First Prayer

Paul ends this section with a prayer that God will assist them in carrying out the instructions he has



The Fountain of Trajan in Ephesus portrayed Trajan with his foot on the entire globe. While emperor, Trajan initiated the third major Roman persecution of Christians. Photo: Mike Willis.

¹ The chapter and verse divisions in our modern New Testaments were arranged by Robert Estienne (whose name was Latinized “Robert Stephanus”). Stephanus, published a revised edition of Erasmus’ Greek New Testament in 1550. This is the text often called the *Textus Receptus*, i.e., the “text received by all.”

just given to them. This is the first of three prayers he offers on their behalf in this chapter. He prays that God would grant them **to be like-minded toward one another** (15:5), in order that they might **with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ** (15:6). Although the Romans do not seem to have had the same struggle with sects and divisions that the Corinthians had, the admonition is very similar. He told them, “I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10). How often do the religious world and even our own brethren forget that unity of teaching and harmony among true believers is the command of God! In the context of our text, while the weak and strong brothers might be at different places in their understanding of an issue such as the eating of meats, in their reverence for God and love for His people they should be “like-minded.” He ends this section commanding once again, **receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God** (15:7).

Jew and Gentile Under Christ (15:8-21)

One of the most clear illustrations of the kind of unity in Christ which Paul commends to the Romans is seen in the very relationship the Jew and Gentile could enjoy in Christ. To go from a position in which it was considered unlawful “for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation” (Acts 10:28) to then considering such a person a brother in Christ is remarkable. Jesus offered Himself

in service to **the circumcision** (i.e., the Jewish people) **for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers** (15:8), but He did so **that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy** (15:9a). This role of the Messiah was not the invention of first century Christians. Paul cites four Old Testament prophecies in support of this Mes-



Marcus Aurelius, the “Philosopher emperor,” ruled during the fourth Roman persecution of Christians.
Photo: Kyle Pope.

sianic promise: Psa. 18:49 (15:9b); Deut. 32:43 (15:10); Psa. 117:1 (15:11); and Isa. 11:10 (15:12). This shows from all three sections of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (which began with the book of Psalms—see Luke 24:44) that the Gentiles would be brought into the New Covenant.

Paul’s Second Prayer

The second prayer that Paul offers for the brethren in this chapter concerns their own joy and hope. He writes, **may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in**

believing, that you may abound in hope by (lit. “in”) **the power of the Holy Spirit** (15:13). Paul prays that God might fill them with “joy and peace in believing.” The trials that come from faith in Jesus can often rob the believer of the joy and peace that we should enjoy in Christ. His prayer is that this will not be the case. Rather, he prays that they would allow the hope set before Christians to “abound” in them “in the power of the Holy Spirit.” We must remember that the Romans had not yet received any miraculous spiritual gifts (Rom. 1:11). Paul is talking about the non-miraculous measure by which the “power of the Holy Spirit” can lead one to “abound in hope.” This power rests in the gospel itself (Rom. 1:16). The child of God who will allow this to dwell and live within him can increase in hope as each day passes.

His prayer does not reflect concern on his part that the brethren were lacking in such joy and hope. Rather he declares that he is **confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another** (15:14). Here we notice that their being “filled with knowledge” (i.e., knowledge of the gospel) is set parallel with what he just prayed—that they “abound in hope in the power of the Holy Spirit.” This demonstrates once again that he is confident that what he has prayed for is working within them: the hope that comes from the power of the Holy Spirit which rests in the message of the gospel.

Of all Paul’s epistles to churches, the epistle to the Romans contains perhaps the least amount of rebuke (with the possible exception of the epistle to the Philippians). Even

so, Paul describes himself as speaking **more boldly to you on some points, as reminding you, because of the grace given to me by God** (15:15). This may refer to the strong points made about man's sinfulness (Chapters 1-3), the firm explanation of Israel's condition (Chapters 9-11), or even some of the practical admonitions in the last few chapters. At any rate, he describes himself as doing this in recognition of himself as a **minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles** striving to make sure **that the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable** (15:16). Although he had not yet worked with this church in the heart of the Gentile world, he feels the strong compulsion, as the "apostle to the Gentiles" (Rom. 11:13) to do all that he could to lead them to do right and to be right with God. In so doing, they would be an acceptable "offering" to God.

The "Apostle to the Gentiles"

Paul took his responsibility to teach the Gentiles very seriously. In obedience to the Lord's charge to teach the Gentiles (Acts 26:17), Paul considered the work he had done **reason to glory in Christ Jesus in the things which pertain to God** (15:17). He does not focus on **things which Christ has not accomplished through him** (15:18a), i.e., what others had done in this regard. Instead, his own efforts he declares, to have been occasions in which **in mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ** (15:19). Illyricum was just east of Italy across the Adriatic Sea. The preaching in Illyricum to which he refers likely took place when he passed through Macedonia into Greece (Acts 20:1-2). If so,

he would have come to the inland border just north of Greece and west of Macedonia. Although still some distance from them, this would have been the closest he had come to Rome upon the writing of this epistle.

The emphasis upon his own work, should not be understood as arrogance. Paul is more than willing to see others join in labor in the



Constantine was the first Roman emperor who made it legal for Christians to worship.
Courtesy of FreeStockPhotos.com.

kingdom (see Phil. 1:18). His focus comes from a conviction to carry out the task he had been given to the best of his ability. It was his aim **to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man's foundation** (15:20). If he went where others had already been, it might have meant that some who had never heard the truth were left untouched. While the Lord gave him breath, he wanted all to come to obedience to the gospel.

Paul saw the work of preaching the gospel as that of "planting" (cf. 1 Cor. 3:6) or "building" (cf. 1 Cor. 3:10). Those taught were

"God's field" or "God's building" and all preachers of the gospel were "God's fellow workers" (1 Cor. 3:9). Although he chose not to "build on another man's foundation" he had no reservation about someone else building upon his. He told the Corinthians, "According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it" (1 Cor. 3:10). He uses the term "foundation" here of the initial teaching of the gospel. Elsewhere he emphasizes that, in terms of the ground of faith, "no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11). As an apostle, he played a special role in the laying of this foundation of faith. He told the Ephesians that the church is built, "on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20).

Paul's Plans to Come to Rome (15:22-33)

In Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica he expressed a desire to come to them. In explanation of the reason he had not been able to do so he explained, "Satan hindered us" (1 Thess. 2:18). This seems to refer to persecution that had prevented such a trip (Acts 17:13-14). In our text Paul's hindrance was not "Satan" but rather **for this reason**, i.e., the reason he just stated of desiring to preach where no one else had preached (15:22a). His hope, upon the writing of this epistle, was that he would finally be able to come to them **no longer having a place in these parts**, i.e., a place to teach where others had not (15:23).

Paul's plan was to **journey to Spain** and come to the Romans on the way (15:24a). He writes, **I hope to see you on my journey,**

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and to be helped on my way there by you, if first I may enjoy your company for a while (15:24b). For Paul, time with brethren was a delight and something that he *enjoyed*. So it should be with us. But first, he tells them, **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** (15:25-26). "Contribution" (Gr. *koinōnia*) means "joint-participation" (Thayer). This is the same word translated "fellowship" and "communion" elsewhere. Giving to the needs of the saints is an act of worship to God. It is an act of fellowship and joint participation in the cause of Christ. This, like the example in Acts 11:26-30, was a gift of benevolence. We see no examples of evangelistic enterprises in which money was collected and funneled into one church to carry out some enterprise. Evangelistic support was always to the preacher directly (see Phil. 4:15-18).

This "fellowship" in the needs of the saints was a cooperative effort. Paul declares, **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 (15:27).

The moral debt that the Gentile churches felt to their Jewish brethren as the "root" and "lump" (see Rom. 11:16) led them to generosity in the face of need. Paul planned to take this gift to Jerusalem having **sealed to them this fruit** and then to **go by way of the brethren in Rome to Spain** (15:28). He

is confident that when he comes to them he will **come in the fullness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ** (15:29). Little did he know that it would be in chains. Even so, it would become a blessing to many (Phil. 1:13).

Striving Together in Prayer

Although Paul's position in the early church was very important, his humility is seen in his constant appeals to the brethren to go to God on his behalf so that a certain effort might be fruitful. Paul writes, **I beg you, brethren to strive together with me in prayers to God for me** (15:30). We must never fail to recognize the importance of joint ap-

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peals to God for a given cause. Paul told the Colossians that Epaphras was "always laboring fervently for you in prayers" (Col. 4:12). In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians he credited his previous escape from death (in part) to the fact that they had been "helping together in prayer" (2 Cor. 1:11).

In our text he begs the Romans to "strive together" with him in prayer for three things:

1. That I may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe (15:31a). Unfortunately, this would not be the case. The Jewish unbelievers would cause Paul to be arrested (Acts 21:33) and they would try to kill him (Acts 23:12). Further he would have them pray...

2. That my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints (15:31b), i.e., that the gift he was bringing to the saints would be acceptable. Finally,...

3. That I may come to you with joy by the will of God, and may be refreshed together with you (15:32). He would come to them, but in chains and after a long delay (Acts 24-28).

Paul's Third Prayer

Paul has prayed for their unity of thought in bearing with one another (15:5). He has prayed for their "joy in believing" that they might "abound in hope" (15:13). Now, he offers one final prayer in this chapter, that **the God of peace be with you all. Amen** (15:33). Such a prayer is often aimed at two objectives:

1. Continued Fellowship With God. The Christian can have the assurance of God's continued presence in his

life at all times. Jesus promised, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). The Hebrew writer declares the Lord's promise, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5). God will not break these promises of care and oversight, but we may choose to abandon God. Such a prayer, in essence a prayer for continued

faithfulness, so that the promise of God’s presence in our lives will not be impaired by our own sinfulness. Yet, beyond this it can also be aimed at leading to a...

2. Personal Realization of God’s Presence. Proverbs 15:3 declares, “The eyes of the Lord are in every

place, keeping watch on the evil and the good” (Prov. 15:3). The Psalmist asked, “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?” (Ps. 139:7), with the inferred answer being, *nowhere!* In addition to Paul’s desire that they continue in fellowship with God, he

may also be addressing their own need to recognize God’s presence. When the Christian recognizes that he stands at all times in the presence of the one to whom we must give an account, it tempers and modifies our actions and moves us to treat others as God would have us to.

Questions

1. For what does Paul claim that “things were written before” (15:4)? _____

2. List the three things that Paul prays for in this chapter: a. (15:5); _____
b. _____ (15:13) and c. _____ (15:33).
3. What is Paul confident that the Romans possessed (15:14)? _____

4. What does Paul call the Gentile converts whom he strives to make acceptable to God (15:16)? _____

5. Explain how Paul uses the term “foundation” in this chapter (15:20)? _____

How does this harmonize with 1 Corinthians 3:11? _____

6. What does Paul indicate had kept him from coming to Rome (15:22)? _____

Is this the same type problem described in 1 Thessalonians 2:18? Why or why not? _____

7. How is the Greek word *koinōnia*, translated “contribution” in this chapter, rendered elsewhere (15:26)? _____

8. Explain the difference between the biblical pattern for benevolence and evangelism. _____

9. How does Paul describe praying together for something (15:30)? _____
