

Prayer

Glory, honour, power and praise be to You, Lord Jesus Christ. You know all things, yet You show understanding of the lives we lead, of our need of forgiveness and the means of grace. You can do all things, yet You choose to share with us Your work in the world. Lord Jesus, Your graciousness amazes us, and You are worthy of all praise; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Who are your personal 'enemies'? Do what Jesus recommends, and pray for your enemies

On-going prayers

- **Pray this week** about witness. *Pray about the attitude of all God's people towards others; ask the Lord to give His people a heart of love.*
- *Ask God to help the world's nations deal with the problem of injustice*
- *Seek forgiveness for the sins of God's people in the world today*

Meditation

Do not stop the work of the Spirit ...
it satisfies the soul, so the heart can breathe the fresh air of life.

Do not stop being kind ...
it binds people together in a contract of love, which never fails.

Do not stop offering forgiveness ...
it heals as many as will give it or receive it, and often, both.

Do not stop patient enduring ...
it maintains hope and sustains the soul at times of great trial.

Do not stop expecting revelation ...
it will come in a moment, and your life will be changed forever.

Do not stop praying for healing ...
it opens you up to the power of God's Spirit to work in you anew.

Do not stop being faithful ...
it is the proof of your faith in Christ Jesus before Almighty God.

Bible Study - Romans 15:1-6

¹ We who are strong ought to bear with the weaknesses of those who are not strong, and ought not to please ourselves. ² Each of us should seek the best for our neighbour for the good purpose of building up. ³ For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, 'The abuses of those who abuse you have fallen on me.' ⁴ For whatever was previously written down was recorded for our instruction, so that through patient endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might take full ownership of hope. ⁵ May the God of patient endurance and encouragement give you a common mind about this, following the example of Christ Jesus, ⁶ so that together you may give unanimous glory to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thought for the day

Text

Romans 15:4

⁴ For whatever was previously written down was recorded for our instruction, so that through patient endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might take full ownership of hope.

Thought

This verse highlights the importance of using God's Word to help us know the truth about God and guide our daily living. To many it seems a mystery, but to those who have committed themselves to God through Christ, it reveals all truth!

Scriptures outline God's plan for Creation; it is a well explained and complete plan, and this is why we can have hope in the future. What lies ahead may seem obscure to us, but God understands it and has already laid down a pathway whereby we can return to Him, through Christ, in eternity. Let us therefore trust in Him and live in hope.

Review

Some things are built into Christianity and do not change. Belief that God is one, and acceptance of the saving work of Jesus Christ through death and Resurrection is another, and neither can we leave out the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. These three are the permanent features of the ancient creeds that have defined Christian faith for thousands of years. However, alongside these important definitions of faith, the Bible, and the works of Paul in particular, emphasise the importance not just of right belief but also of right action. We are called to demonstrate our faith through what we do.

In general, scripture identifies love as the key characteristic of Christian behaviour; in the Old Testament, the law says, 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Leviticus 19:18) and in the New Testament, Jesus commands 'love one another, as I have loved you' (John 13:34etc.). Love reflects the character of God, and Paul knew that love needed to be explained further, to help people understand was expected of them by God, so as he continued to write about the thorny issue of eating food (a first century problem), he sought to identify the underlying principles of love in action.

Paul's first principle, following the earlier discussion about food, is that of seeking the best interests of others and not self; he says, we 'ought not to please ourselves' (15:1,2). It is far easier to understand this than the other phrases Paul has used, summed up as 'deferring to the weaker brother or sister', because it avoids the implication of judgement. After all, from their own point of view, everyone can suggest that their opponent has a 'weaker' argument! The truth of the matter, as Paul clearly saw, is that it those who claim to follow the One who gave Himself for others, should do the same

The second principle is that of 'building up'. The word appears at the end of verse 2, and it reminds us of Jesus' teaching own about the Kingdom. He constantly preached about the Kingdom, its presence, its growth and its completion in God's good time; for example, using the parable of the sower (Matt 13:1f.). To make the same point and develop the idea, Paul spoke about building up the church, which is the practical expression of the Kingdom of God in the world (e.g. 1 Cor 14:12). He preached a message that bid Christians work for the growth of the church until the Lord might come again, and his constant refrain was 'build up', not 'tear down' (see Ephesians 2:22f.), and do this with love (1 Corinthians 13).

The next principle is that of suffering service, mentioned here in verse 3. This means more than just seeking the good of others (as in the first principle). The verse refers Christ, who was prepared to serve sacrificially, giving even his life for others. This is what Paul means by saying that He took on Himself 'the abuse' that others deserved (meaning the abuse of death as a punishment for sin), and this verse connects strongly with Isaiah 53, the Old Testament prophecy of the suffering of God's Messiah and servant. As far as Paul was concerned, Christ was the model of all Christian discipleship.

Paul closed this section of his letter with words of praise and thanks to God (15:5,6), but the effect of the whole passage is to offer guidance that explains how the Christian should live a life of love, and reflect the love of God is everyday life. We tend to rely on the ancient creeds to tell us the truth about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, but these creeds do not give us guidelines for how to behave. The principles Paul outlines here are as good a set of guidelines as we may find in scripture for understanding the Christian life. In other letters, Paul says more about this, for example, in the 'fruit of the Spirit' (Galatians 5:22f.), but the principles of seeking the best for others, building up, and service remain fundamental.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- Bearing the weakness of others
- Building up
- The suffering servant

- The Testimony of Scripture and the Example of Christ

Going Deeper

We will now look at each of the principles of Christian discipleship which are mentioned in this passage, and assess their contribution to the life of God's people, the church. All of them are based upon Christ, but what counts is how we use them in the everyday life of our own church fellowships.

Bearing the weaknesses of others

Verse 1 explains what appears to be an admirable principle, which is that those who are strong should bear the burdens of the weak. However, this can sound somewhat patronising if given as advice in the midst of a fierce dispute about some matter of Christian ethics. We all know how heated such arguments can be! However, Paul is stating a general principle at this point and has long since given up discussing the details of the issue of eating meat with which this discussion began (14:1f.).

It is fair to say that most disputes within the church have two (or more) parties, each of which believe they are 'in the right' and are therefore 'strong' in the language of this text. Making no judgements at all, if everyone were to act with the goodwill and selflessness described by Paul, then the chances for peace and reconciliation will be good. If each party seeks the good of the other, they will begin to learn something of the viewpoint of the other, and this ability to please others will then help create the understanding. This is essential if there is ever to be a measured approach to understanding God's Word on whatever difficult matter has divided people in the first place.

It is helpful to be able to read in the Acts of the Apostles of an occasion when Paul, a man who felt completely at liberty in Christ and beholden to no-one, nevertheless underwent the usual Jewish ritual practices before entering the Temple in Jerusalem so that he would cause no offense to others (see Acts 21:26f.). This was not what Paul would have wanted to do from his own point of view, but he certainly put into practice what he preached!

The purest example of this principle of Christian living is Jesus Christ Himself, whose life was lived for those he came to save. Those who are followers of Christ are not those who claim any strength of moral superiority because of being a Christian, but those who like Jesus, live a life which demonstrates the true moral superiority of living for others rather than themselves (15:1). This, of course, is the logic of the Kingdom of God and not the logic of the world!

Building up

The way Paul writes makes it very clear that 'building up' is something that is not normally done by individuals. It is something that is done by God's people as a whole; as he repeatedly talks of God's people in the plural; 'we who are strong ...' (15:1); 'each of us should ...' (15:2). Furthermore, the 'building up' principle mentioned by Paul in verse 2 (see also 14:19-21) is integrally linked with the previous principle, that of seeking the best for others (see also 13:8-10 and 14:15). The message is clear, the church will not be built up into what God wants it to be unless God's people live according to the principle of putting the interests of others first.

When Jesus talked in parables about the Kingdom of God, he did so using illustrations from agriculture. He talked about growth using examples of wheat, vineyards and shepherding, for example. At the end of His life He commissioned His disciples to continue the organic growth of the Kingdom. Paul used some of these examples, but his two main examples of the Kingdom were the 'body of Christ' (1 Cor 12) and a building (see 1 Cor 3:14, Eph 2:20f., Col 2:7), and he also began to talk about God's people collectively as the 'church' (1 Cor 4:7, 11:18f. Eph 3:10f.).

There are many books available today about church growth and extending the Kingdom of God. The reason for these books is precisely because the church is not 'building up' in many places, and where it is, some leaders and pastors feel it necessary to write books and tell everyone else what should be done. Such books are interesting, but the principles are in the Bible, and the starting one is fellowship. No church is built up unless its members are looking out for one another and putting each other first, as it says in this text. It sounds very simple, but it requires immense spiritual courage and close contact with Christ to put these principles into action in the life of God's people.

The suffering servant

In verse 3, there are string connections with Psalm 69:9(b); 'the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me' and also from Isaiah 53:8,12; 'He was ... stricken for the transgressions of my people ... he poured Himself out ... yet He bore the sins of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.' (there are many other places in Isaiah 53 where the text reminds us of Romans 15:3)

The principle of the service of others is one thing, but what is described here is something more than this. The psalm (69:9) used by Paul was well known by the early church as one that pointed to the suffering of Christ and His saving work on the Cross, and he used it to appeal to his readers to behave in the same way. Paul knew very well that none of us can do what Christ did nor measure up to the high standards of His complete service of others. However, without the example of His saving work, his advice was merely humanitarian.

People will always argue with people, but if God's people all recognise the authority of God in Jesus Christ, then there remains the hope that they will put their differences aside and unite in the common good, being prepared to take even undeserved suffering for each other in order to further the cause of God's Kingdom and the victory of Good over Evil. The cynics of humanity can never fully grasp this notion or accept that it is something people will live by, and it is only in the church of God that you find the fullest expression of the idea that selflessness is a way of living which effectively builds communities of people.

The Testimony of Scripture and the Example of Christ

There is no doubt that Paul wrote down what he regarded as the principles of faith as evidenced in Scripture, for in verses 4 and 5, he wrote about the nature of God's Word and its meaning. When he wrote about 'patient endurance and encouragement' and 'hope' (15:4), he was using the language of perseverance through trials, weakness and suffering to justify what he had said, inspired by the example of Christ. He had no time for any religious piety or practice within the church that did not both show humility and offer service to others as Christ had done, and this lay at the heart of all he taught.

Achievement through suffering is the universal theme of God's work throughout history, and Paul was determined to ensure that everything he said reflected this consistent pattern of teaching, as he had done throughout his letter. His final word on the matter was unequivocal. Only through keeping the teaching of Scripture in mind can God's people find a resolution to their disagreements and troubles (15:5), for although Scripture says many things about complex human relationships and affairs, humility in service according to the example of Christ is the only one that can bring unity and purpose to God's people (15:6).

Application

It may seem straightforward for us to say that we should look to the example of Christ in order to resolve the problems within the church. However, I suggest that in too many cases, people try to use scripture to justify the opinions they hold rather than turn to the principles of godly living by which these things can alone be solved. I refer to example such as the coming of Christ, issues to do with the Sabbath Day, drinking (rather than eating), baptism and many other issues of church practice. Few of them can be 'resolved' with recourse to Scripture, and resolution will only come when people, leaders and churches are prepared to serve each other in a Christ-like manner, for this is the only basis upon which resolution of disputes can ever be made. Unfortunately, there are so many differences between the vast numbers of churches that exist, each of which seek to maintain their calling to do what they believe is right, and this means that there can be little fellowship or unity in Christ. The structures we place in between to organise practical Christianity need to repent of their divisions and feuding, and genuinely accept that the image of the body (12 Cor 12) applies to all of God's people. Furthermore, it is only possible when people take seriously the call to humble service and Christ-like love at every level of church leadership.

Until such time as the witness of God's people can be made effective and godly by our unity in Him, and until such time as our Lord comes again, this passage challenges not just church, but us as individuals. We also need to pay attention to the principles of love as identified here by Paul, and apply them to our own lives. They are deeply challenging, and the mere sight of them is enough for some to run from them. Few find it palatable to consider a life of service, and it is certainly not culturally acceptable to give oneself for others; the strong advice of most cultures today is 'look after yourself'. There is nothing wrong with self care, but the higher principle of service leads every person to a deeper fulfilment of life.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Can you think of any matters in which you feel 'strong' in comparison to the 'weakness' of others? What makes you think you are right?
2. Is it always possible to seek the good of a neighbour? Are there circumstances in which we cannot do this?
3. Is it right to challenge all the churches to find their unity in Christ and demonstrate it? Do you feel this matter is important or insignificant in the witness of the church?

Discipleship

Discipleship issue in this text

- *Christian unity*
- *Selflessness and sacrificial giving*
- *Building up the body of Christ*

Personal comment:

I long for the day when these barriers can be broken down. If you speak to people about them most simply do not believe that they can be, and many do not see this as necessary or wise! I wonder where such theology comes from. The Bible is insistent, God the Father and Jesus Himself call for His people to be one on almost every page of scripture, and I will not stop speaking about this.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *If you relate one of the issues of discipleship and service mentioned, then follow this through using the 'lifestyle challenge' worksheet.*
- *Reflect upon the practical ways in which we can show service and humility in order to do God's will in difficult circumstances.*

Final Prayer

This day, Lord God, is Your precious gift to each of us. Keep us from falling, and fulfil Your purposes in us today and throughout our lives. Bring us to the end of each day rejoicing, and as Your disciples, may we be glad to be Yours. We praise You through all we do and say. AMEN
