

All Roads Lead Here: People Pleasers and God Praisers
By Jason Huff
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2 Samuel 22:47-51; John 17:20-23; Romans 15:1-12

Our final Scripture reading this morning is from Romans 15:1-12. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. “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.””

In football, there’s one person on the field who’s weak. He can’t tackle anybody. He’s so busy trying to see where everyone is that he has no real way to defend himself. If he gets brought down, his team loses significant amounts of yardage. He must depend on a line of burly guys in front of him just to make sure he can do his job before someone takes him out. Of course, the weak guy I’m speaking about is the quarterback. While he has no power to stop anybody on the field, his role is critical to the success of the team.

As we look at Paul’s words today in Romans 15, we see him start to pull together a number of themes he’s talked about in the previous chapters. A key one is the idea of working together as a team, as a unit. The church is made up of individuals; the church is not a building or a place. But the church is a unity, a group. It’s a team of sorts, of people brought together by God in order to know His love for them, to serve His purposes, and to bring Him glory. And just as the football team has to come together through various roles to win the game, so we too are called to come together as a church to win victories for Christ in our little corner of the world.

And the first thing Paul discusses is protecting the quarterbacks, those people who are so much more important than we might think but who need our defense. Paul says, “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.” This is tricky to translate – it’s not so much “failings” of the weak as it is their incapability, the actual weakness of the weak. Remember from last week how Paul was concerned that we not trample over the consciences of those who have scruples about things that aren’t sins defined biblically, like eating meat sacrificed to idols. While we don’t have that problem, we do have many others that perhaps we should address.

What weaknesses do we deal with in the modern church? We're not talking about sins proper, because those we do have to deal with directly to help those struggling to overcome them. But we have a lot of weaknesses. Starting with the basics – faith. Not everyone has the same amount. Some of us have plenty to spare; we're confident in God and what we believe. But others haven't been in the church as long, or they've been through significant trials, whatever the case may be, they have doubts that manifest themselves in certain ways.

Perhaps they're not sure that God will come through for us; maybe they're thinking that we've got to provide for ourselves because God won't handle our needs. We work through those issues. Instead of saying, "Boy, your faith is weak," instead we say, "Sometimes it's hard to believe, but together I believe we can wait on God's timing." We haven't run into this yet, but maybe somebody's faith gets in the way of something like Halloween or Meal and a Movie. We would work through that because we don't exist for our own pleasure but for God to be glorified.

But there are others. Simpler ones, maybe, but frustrating if we haven't determined to bear with their weaknesses. Someone doesn't really understand our Bible studies that goes to a deeper level, like some of the Ligonier studies we've done in the past, so we choose something more basic. Some folks are schedule challenged, so we make accommodations so they can participate. We are all somewhat weak in the financial department, so we open up our homes so that we can fellowship and grow in our love of Christ.

One of the hardest things a pastor ever hears is that a family's leaving because they say "I'm not being fed." Now that can be true in many churches – the preaching is bad, it doesn't connect, there are no ways to deepen your faith and grow in Christ. No dispute from me there about leaving a church that's theologically off-base or does not grow the congregation's faith.

But often it's said because we live in a consumeristic culture where many people expect that the church is the spiritual 7-11 or WalMart. We go, we pay our money, and we expect religious goods and services we want in return. If everything doesn't match our expectations – the music, the pastor, the sermon, the lighting, the venue, the other congregants – we'll pack up and head to someplace that looks sunnier. We don't want to be patient with the weaknesses we see. Now thankfully, the vast majority of you all here have been at CrossWay since the start. That's not been our story, for those who are here. But believers are called to something different. We are called to pray for the weak, to bear with the weak, not to abandon them.

In fact, what we are supposed to do is serve them. Paul continues: "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." This gives a completely different side to the idea of being people pleasers. Because Scripturally, we rarely hear that. It's because the intentions of most people are against God.

Scripture makes it clear that pleasing God always comes first. When the apostles faced persecution for sharing word of Jesus' resurrection, the Jewish leadership called the Sanhedrin told them everything would be OK if they'd just stop. But they replied, "We must obey God rather than men!" In Galatians 1, Paul says bluntly, "If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ." There is never a contradiction; serving God always tops everything.

But what does Paul says, “Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.” There’s the kicker. Whatever we do to please our neighbor is meant to help him and, literally, to edify him – which means to help him improve morally and spiritually. We are to be people pleasers in ways that are meant to bring people closer to the Lord.

What kind of things might that be? I’ll throw out some ideas. It might be helping with childcare so that someone could attend a Bible study or a retreat. It might be giving them a ride to church. It might be picking up a couple extra tickets to a Christian concert that someone else might not be able to afford. It’s inviting friends who aren’t believers to Meal and a Movie for a night out with some fellowship (and possibly a way to get connected). Maybe it’s taking on that extra project at work so your co-worker might know that your invite to church means something.

Pleasing people by serving them in faith makes an impact. People remember it, and they remember you. It is so unlike our modern culture that it gets through in a way that little else does. I am frankly a little stunned at a few unbelievers who consider us “best friends” and we feel we’ve done so little for them or with them. It’s because we showed them they matter to us. We keep praying that those simple acts of kindness would influence them to believe. We keep serving and we leave that up to God.

When we do that, Paul reminds us that we are following in the path of Jesus. He did not come to be served but to serve, He said in Matthew 20 and Mark 10. Scripture says He went throughout Galilee, healing all who would let Him. He fed huge crowds more than once so they could continue learning God’s ways. He spent His life teaching – which if you know any teachers, you know that is a serving job. And when He had completed all of those things, He finished the most important service task – taking our sins to the grave with Him as our Savior.

Now Paul does a little aside with the Scripture he quotes from Psalm 69. He reminds us that the Old Testament Scripture points to Jesus and teaches us how to live like Him, and he tells us that “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.” This serving others rather than ourselves business? It’s nothing new. The Scriptures give us encouragement to do it and hope that it will matter in the end.

Scripture reminds us that God has been there all along, leading us all the whole way. He gives us the courage and the strength to do the difficult thing, to serve rather than be served. And if you are feeling discouraged, turn to the Scriptures. God preserved them so we could know we are surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses throughout the centuries who have come before us and found the aid and rest of God.

Paul then continues: “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.” Remember how we started talking about being a team? This is where it comes in.

There are twenty-two players on a football team. Some, like the quarterback, may get a lot of the glory. But if one guy doesn't show up or do his job, there's no way they can win. The other team will exploit that opening. When you go to the locker room after the game, it's not "I won" or "I lost," it's "we won" or "we lost." Most team sports are the same way, and when someone starts putting the victory on their shoulders alone, the others get angry. Coaches talk about it a lot; they'll talk about the core reason a game went the way it did, and it has to do with how well the team played as a unit, how unified they were.

We have unity even greater than a football team because what we're doing has eternal purpose and significance. We come together around our faith, which informs us of who God is, of who we are, and the magnificent salvation we've received. We want to glorify God as one big voice. And when we are united around Christ, our voice is heard clearly and boldly. Why is that so hard for us?

There's a few things that hinder our unity. First, there's our significant differences. On a sports team, in the military, even if everyone doesn't get along, even if everyone doesn't have the same background or skin tone, there's a respect for the amount of work done to be a part of the squad. Everyone goes through basic training; everyone goes through preseason camp.

The church is brought together by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God our Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, as 2 Corinthians 13 puts it. But we are wildly different otherwise. We have different political views, different outside interests, different family structures, different amounts of wealth, even culturally different ways of understanding some Scriptures. Many of the divisions in the church over the centuries haven't been over great errors in theology but miscommunication and cultural differences.

But other things hinder our unity. Our American culture celebrates the individual. We're told that we, personally, matter most. It urges us to do what feels right for us, no matter the consequences to others – and we're seeing the consequences of this mindset play out in the Hollywood scandals right now. But we're told, buy that phone, that car, you are most important, not the community. And ultimately, culture attacks the church because a unified church is dangerous to the powers of hell. It threatens to expose the darkness and proclaim the truth that there is a judge of the world, and the only way to escape His condemnation is through faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

When we are united with one voice praising God, when our lives speak most loudly to the goodness of the Lord, when our actions show that God is at work in our lives, when we do it together as the family of faith, it rocks the world. When we can stretch our arms out to other churches doing the same thing, we can accomplish so much. As a tiny congregation, when we've unified with other Christians from other churches, we've fed the hungry in inner-city Detroit. We've sent boxes of gifts to show the love of Christ to children around the world. We've helped a couple of young girls and their villages in Peru. The church united is battling poverty around the world far better than any secular relief organization or government.

As Paul states, God provides the spirit of unity; he prays that we might have it. How can you live by that spirit of unity? Make it a habit to worship together every week. Come to events like Meal and a Movie, even if it isn't "your thing." Carve out the time for Bible study when it starts back up in February. If you can, invite others from the church into your home from time to time. It has been a huge blessing to us when we've been invited in, especially because it's not that common in this part of the world to have folks over.

We are a family, more than a team, more than a squad. Not everyone can do it all, all of the time. Finances and schedules play a role, and God knows that; He's placed you where you are in your current circumstances, and He knows what you can and can't do. I believe that God has put that spirit of unity into CrossWay; let's live it, and then invite more people to be a part of it.

Paul ends this section saying, "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." He finishes by quoting several Scriptures to show that Jesus came to serve the Jews, to fulfill the promises made to them, and to bring Jew and Gentile together into the worship and praise of God. People from every nation will rejoice in God our Savior.

Accepting one another is not the easiest thing in the world. And you know what? Living in unity, living as the family of God, it's not easy because to go deep, to not live on the surface with each other, seeing each other for an hour a week, to actually make that investment, it's hard because all the flaws come to the surface. I can hide my worst self for an hour a week, usually. I can wear a mask. But take longer, and things that are selfish, wrong, sinful, they bubble up. The reason the people we love the most are the people we hurt the most is because we show our real selves to them.

But to be truly accepted – not the mask, not the false self, but to be accepted for our real selves, warts and all, scars, blemishes, hurts, sins – that's liberating. To know you'll be loved despite the worst of yourself? That's what frees you – to reject sin and do what pleases God, to live as a follower of Jesus, to invite others in, to love others despite what they might have done to you. When you know you are accepted, you can accept others.

And that's what Jesus did. He accepted us. He didn't die for good people; His own followers didn't understand much of what He taught and abandoned Him at His death. And those were the *best* of them! He died for us knowing that we would spend much of our lives in disobedience. He didn't die for good people; He died so that through Him, we might become His own people, a people who would eventually be purified through and through. We accept one another with all our flaws because Jesus gave Himself for flawed, broken people. His acceptance of us in our weakness gives us the strength and courage to accept others as they are.

Please your neighbor for her growth in grace. Praise God for saving you from sin and accepting you as you are. Deal patiently with the weak and accept those who might otherwise not appeal to you. Sounds tough, right? But not so much with the Holy Spirit's working in our lives. When you know God loves and accepts you, when you know God has given His Son for you and has moved heaven and earth to bring you into His Kingdom, you know He will give you the power to live in love and unity with your brothers and sisters in the church.