

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS  
*Commentary by Rev. Msgr. Gregory Mikesch*  
*Lesson 19 - Romans 15:1-29*

**Romans 15:1-6**

The six verses we will examine in this segment form the conclusion of Paul's address on the issue of unity between the weak and the strong Christians.

In verse 1, Paul does not hesitate to count himself among those he considers strong in faith. He says that the strong must be willing to "put up with the failings of the weak." Paul does not want to ridicule the weak, but he also makes clear that their faith is immature. They are still holding onto the notion that human efforts and even dietary laws are still a factor in achieving salvation. Paul hopes that these weak ones will come to the conviction that salvation comes only through faith in Jesus Christ. Once this is understood then a Christian can say, "I will refrain from eating, not as a way of achieving salvation, but out of compassion for the scruples of others." The strong Christian is able to sacrifice for others.

In verse 2, Paul wants his readers to feel that he is speaking to each of them as individuals. If the community is to be healthy, then each member must join in the effort. The health of the body of Christ is made visible in the compassion the members have for one another. Paul often speaks of the Church as the temple of God (Ephesians 2:21). Keeping with this image he encourages the Roman Christians to be concerned about "building up the neighbor." Unity is a sign of the presence of the Spirit.

The reason which Paul has put forward for this altruism is the health of the community. Now, in verse 3, he presents another reason namely that this is how Christ sacrificed for his people; therefore, Christians should sacrifice for each other. This is the same image which is used as an introduction for the Christological hymn in Philippians 2:5-11, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Paul supports this reasoning with a quotation from Psalm 69:9. The speaker in the psalm is one who suffers for being faithful to the ways of the Lord. Paul interprets this psalm verse by referring to Christ as the one who willingly takes upon himself the sufferings of the people.

Verse 4 is a powerful verse for all who find joy in studying God's word. When Paul speaks of "whatever was written in former days" he is speaking of the Hebrew Scripture. Remember that Paul is writing in 58 A.D. and so the earliest gospel has not yet been written. (Mark was written cir. 65 A.D.) Paul says that the scriptures have the power to instruct us and this instruction leads to steadfastness and encouragement, which leads to hope.

When we study and pray God's word, we grow in our conviction that God loves us and has promised us eternal life. This realization helps us to share this same love with one another. When we witness the love of God in the community of faith, then our own faith is strengthened and this leads to hope. Hope is the firm conviction that salvation is ours. God has promised and he will not deceive.

The last two verses of this segment form Paul's prayer for the Roman community. He prays that God, who is the source of steadfastness and encouragement, may truly form a community united in the love of Jesus Christ. When the community is living in love then God is being glorified; for this is God's desire for his people; this is God's effect on his people. Paul prays that the people may proclaim the glory of God with one voice: the voice of the Church, the voice of the body of Christ. This is what our liturgy is meant to be. Liturgy reaches its fullness when it expresses the self-sacrificing love of the members, one for another. When the community is at peace, then Christ truly reigns and the Father is glorified in the one voice of his people. This is Paul's prayer for the Roman Christians; this is his prayer for us.

#### **Romans 15:7-13**

Paul realizes that he is approaching the end of his letter. As he reflects on this major theme of unity within the Church, he turns his attention to his earlier presentation of unity between the Jewish and Gentile Christians. In verse 7, he calls upon all members of the community to welcome one another. Paul's words reflect the words of Jesus in John 13:34, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." God is glorified in the love Christians have for each other. This is God's desire.

Verse 8 is quite involved. Paul says that Christ has become a "servant of the circumcised." This is a formal way of saying that Jesus has become a servant of the Jewish people, and to be a servant of the Jews, he had to be of the Jewish people. Paul then says that Jesus has become this servant "on behalf of the truth of God." The "truth of God" means the "faithfulness or fidelity of God." Paul wants to show that God has made certain promises and that he is always faithful to his word. One of the promises God made to the patriarchs was, "All the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring" (Genesis 28:14). God also promised David, "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:16). Paul establishes that the promises of the past have been fulfilled in the person of Jesus. Paul indicates that the promises of future glory are equally trustworthy because they are rooted in the fidelity of God and because they too are fulfilled in the person of Jesus.

The combination of verses 8 and 9 is an echo of Paul's words in earlier parts of his letter, particularly 1:16 and 2:10. In these earlier passages he speaks of how salvation and glory are granted to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles. In verse 8 Paul already establishes that Jesus is the servant of the Jews. In verse 9, he includes the Gentiles among those who are to benefit from the promises, for they too will "glorify God for his mercy."

In the Hebrew language, one of the most powerful words used to describe God is the word **hesed** – meaning "steadfast love." The writers of Israel often combined the qualities of fidelity and mercy into this one word "hesed." The psalm which exemplifies this is Psalm 136. The second part of each verse is the repetition "For his steadfast love endures forever" or in Hebrew, "For his 'hesed' endures forever." When the scripture writers ponder all the virtues which are attributed to God, these are the greatest. God is faithful and he is merciful. This is who God is. This is what Paul has in mind in verses 8 and 9. Both Jews and Gentiles are blessed with the "hesed" of God.

Paul now wants to show that the idea that Gentiles are to share in the promises of God is not coming from his own imagination. He quotes four passages from the Hebrew Scriptures to support what he is saying. Each of these passages contains the word "Gentile." The texts show that it has always been part of God's plan to include the Gentiles in redemption.

The first passage in verse 9 is from Psalm 18:49. When the original psalm speaks of "the nations" Paul translates this as Gentiles. The setting for this psalm is that the faithful Jew is proclaiming the glory of God and doing so among the Gentiles. By doing this, the Gentiles hear the word of God and are drawn to believe. The second passage is from Deuteronomy 32:43. Notice the alteration which Paul makes in this text. The original words are, "Praise, O heavens, his people, worship him all you gods!" This is quite a step from "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." Remember, Paul is not opposed to altering texts to fit his purpose.

The third passage is from Psalm 117:1. In this text, Paul stays with the original wording. This psalm clearly calls for all people to proclaim the glory of God. Psalm 117 is the shortest of all the psalms. The fourth passage is taken from Isaiah 11:10. One point which may account for the differences in these quotations is that Paul is quoting from the Septuagint, (See the Side Note: on page 31 of the commentary) and not directly from the Hebrew text. But still, Paul wants to show that Jesus is the promised descendent of Jesse, and that the Gentiles are also destined to share eternal life. In Jesus they find their hope.

Verse 13 concludes the doctrinal section of Paul's letter. He prays that the God of hope may fill both Jews and Gentiles with the inner peace and firm joy which come from the gift of faith. He prays that they be filled with hope, that certainty of salvation. This gift of hope comes from the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. As Paul is filled with zeal through the power of the Holy Spirit, he longs for the entire Roman community to also witness to the mercy of God by their love for one another.

## Romans 15:14-21

With verse 14, Paul begins the concluding part of his letter. He is mindful that he has never visited Rome. He is not the one who helped establish the faith. But Paul is aware, as he states in the opening lines of his letter, that the faith of the Roman Christians is “Proclaimed throughout the world.” (1:8) He begins verse 14 by complimenting the Romans. He tells them that they are mature in the faith for they possess goodness, knowledge and the ability to support each other. Paul is sincere in his remarks for history indicates that there was indeed something unique about the Roman community.

If Paul is so convinced of the self-sufficiency of the Romans, then why does he write to them as an authority? In verse 15, he acknowledges that he has taken liberty with his address to them. He says that he has written to them “by way of reminder.” This is Paul’s way of softening his tone. He does not want to appear as if he is telling them something they have not heard. His reminder is a way of strengthening them in the faith. But his primary reason for writing to them in this way is because he has been given this commission by God. Paul knows that he is the apostle to the Gentiles and in this light he sees himself fulfilling his work of preaching the gospel to all people.

In verse 16, Paul uses the imagery of priesthood to describe his ministry among the Gentiles. He says that he is a minister to the Gentiles “in the priestly service of the gospel.” Paul looks upon preaching the gospel as a sacrificial act. When a priest offers a sacrifice to God, the sacrifice must be purified and worthy of consecration. In his preaching, Paul sees the Gentiles as being purified because they are called to repentance. Once purified, they become worthy of being offered to God. The presence of the Spirit within them has sanctified them and so Paul can now offer them to God in priestly ministry.

Verse 17 is a good attitudinal summary of Paul’s ministry. He knows that he has worked hard in the service of the gospel. When he is pushed by his opponents, he lists sufferings he has endured (2 Corinthians 11:21-29). He calls this “foolish boasting.” But Paul does not hesitate to boast of the things God has accomplished. In this way Paul keeps the attention where it belongs, on God. It is God who has brought about any good accomplished through Paul’s ministry. God is the power guiding Paul in all that he does.

Verse 18 is a repetition of Paul’s statement that he is but the instrument in the hands of God. The goal which God accomplishes through him is to bring the Gentiles to obedience, which is another way of saying, bringing them to faith. The obedience in faith is made visible in the way people live. As Paul says in the earlier part of his letter, he wants to call people out of the darkness of sin and into the light of life with Christ.

Through his words and actions, through signs and wonders, but primarily through the power of the Spirit, Paul has allowed God to use him as the apostle to the Gentiles.

In verse 19, he says that his ministry has been so successful that the gospel has been preached from Jerusalem to the area of Illyricum. (This is the southern part of former Yugoslavia.) Paul's ministry in the east is now complete. Not that everyone in the eastern districts is a believer but Paul knows that the faith has taken root in such a way that it cannot be dislodged. Having fulfilled his mission in the east, he now wants to turn to the west. He wants the Romans to be equally enthusiastic about the proclamation of the gospel. He hopes that they will support him as he passes through Rome on his way to Spain.

Paul has consistently followed the plan of preaching the gospel in places which have never heard the good news. He does not want to build on another person's work. Paul does not explain the reason for this strong desire to enter new territory but we can speculate. He is so filled with the love of Christ and appreciation for his unexpected gift of faith that he wants to give his life in complete dedication to Christ. He will risk any suffering for the sake of the gospel and in the end he will offer the ultimate sacrifice, his own life.

In verse 21, Paul quotes from Isaiah 52:15. He is again using the Septuagint and so his quotation will vary from the same verse found in Isaiah. The text in Isaiah is part of the fourth Suffering Servant poem. Isaiah speaks of one who takes on the burdens of the people. Paul knows that this is Jesus. And Paul wants to imitate his Lord and take on burdens which will yield a rich harvest of people for the kingdom of God.

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**Side Note: The Chronological Order of the Gospels**

The gospels are arranged in the New Testament in what was thought to be their chronological order, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But in the late 1700's, German Lutheran bible scholars found evidence to support the view that Mark was written before Matthew. An example of the evidence can be seen when we compare the texts of the account of the apostles asking for the places of honor. (Mark 10:35-45, Matthew 20:20-28 and Luke 22:24-30) The tendency among the gospel writers is to soften those texts which seem embarrassing. Mark says James and John approached Jesus and made their request. Matthew says it was their mother who made the request, thereby absolving them of some responsibility. Luke drops the individual names all together. And John does not even record the episode.

**Romans 15:22-29**

This segment of Paul's letter contains something of a double message. On the one hand, we see a man of faith who is eager to open new territories for the Lord. Paul wants to carry the name of Jesus to the very ends of the earth. He is anxious to go to Spain so that he can continue to proclaim the gospel. On the other hand, we begin to hear faint echoes of 2 Timothy 4:7, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

We hear a man who believes he has completed his mission, at least in the east, and now he heads for Jerusalem where he knows he will be opposed. Paul realizes that the authorities will try to silence him, as they tried to silence his master. But whether he lives or dies, Paul's great desire is to serve the Lord.

In verse 22, Paul continues the thought he develops in 15:20. His mission approach is to preach the gospel in areas where the name of Jesus is not known. He does not want to build on another's foundation. This is one of the reasons why he has not yet visited Rome. The Christian community was already established in Rome and their reputation was well founded (1:8); another possible reason is that this is not yet the will of the Spirit. Remember that Paul is aware that his ministry is being guided by the Spirit. There are times when, for reasons unknown to Paul, the Spirit prevents him from preaching in certain areas (Acts 16:6-7). But now Paul believes that he will visit Rome.

In verse 23, Paul says that there is "no further place for me in these regions." He does not presume that there are no more converts in the east; rather he realizes that this is the time when someone else needs to guide the local communities. This openness reflects one of Paul's great virtues. He is free. He is not possessed by his own comfort or self-importance. He could have stayed in Ephesus or Philippi and been admired as the founder of that community. But Paul does not want this kind of honor; he only wants the honor that comes from being the apostle to the Gentiles. This is the kind of freedom which allows God to do great things in the life of an individual.

Paul tells the Romans that he wants to go to Spain; but first, he wants to enjoy their company and rejoice in their common faith. At this point, Paul is reflecting back on something he says in the first part of his letter. In 1:12 he says that he wants to visit them "so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith." There is certain joy which comes from sharing the faith with other believers. Paul is undoubtedly strong in his faith, but he too needs the encouragement which comes from the body of Christ.

Verse 24 is a call to the Roman Christians to become part of Paul's mission apostolate. They may not be able to go to Spain with him but they can assist in other ways. Paul believes in the power of prayer, so it is very likely that he would ask them to remember him in their prayers. Also, a number of prominent Spaniards live in Rome; e.g. Quintilian, the great orator, and Seneca, the philosopher. Although these men are not Christians, they exemplify the capabilities of some of the people from Spain. It is possible that there are Spanish Christians living in Rome who could open doors for Paul in Spain.

In verse 25, Paul states that he must first go to Jerusalem to deliver the collection which was taken up among the Gentile Churches for the sake of the mother Church. In Galatians 2:1-10, we find the account which speaks of Paul's commission to carry the gospel to the Gentiles.

As part of this decision, Paul is encouraged to always remember the needs of the poor. In Galatians 2:10 he says, "They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do." Paul sees this collection as an opportunity for the new communities to show their thanks to the mother Church in Jerusalem. From Jerusalem the other communities receive the gift of faith, now they respond by providing for the material needs of their brothers and sisters. The needs of the Temple in Jerusalem provided employment for many people. With the growing animosity between the Jews and the Christians, many Christians lost their employment. This is why they are poor.

In verse 26, Paul says that the Gentile Christians "have been pleased to share their resources with the poor." There is no reason to doubt that this collection was successful and a great means of help to those in Jerusalem; but there is also evidence that some of the communities needed an extra push, Corinth in particular. Paul devotes two chapters (2 Corinthians 8-9) to encouraging them to be generous. He is using a positive approach by saying that he knows they will respond but at the same time he applies some pressure. In 2 Corinthians 9:3-4 he says that he is sending helpers ahead so that his "boasting about you may not prove to have been empty." And he adds that "if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated - to say nothing of you - in this undertaking."

Paul can be blunt when he wishes (Galatians 3:1) and he also can be subtle. There is the possibility that this is what is happening in verse 27. He could be asking the Roman Christians to consider adding to the collection for Jerusalem. He has already mentioned in verse 26 that the Gentile Christians "were pleased" to contribute to the needs of others. He clearly states that the Gentiles have been blessed with the gift of faith which came through the mother Church in Jerusalem. Now, it is only appropriate that a gift be offered in return.

In verse 28, Paul sees his journey to Jerusalem as part of his mission. He wants to show the fruit of his work but he is also aware that faith must be put into action. This is very different from saying that good works achieve salvation - they do not. But the gift of faith needs to be manifested in the charity and compassion which is shown to other people. The assistance that is given to the Christians in Jerusalem is a concrete sign that Paul is preaching a faith which is alive.

In verse 29, Paul expresses his longing to visit Rome. He says that when he comes he will do so "in the fullness of the blessing of Christ." After delivering the donation, he will travel to Rome with the realization that he has accomplished God's plan for him in the east. This causes Paul great joy and he looks forward to sharing this joy with the Christians in Rome. The truth of the matter is that he will come to Rome in chains. But even this will not stop him from proclaiming God's word (Acts 28:23).