I. THE DEMAND OF BURDEN BEARING

Romans 15:1-2 – “Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.”

Paul continues his instruction on interactions between mature believers and new believers by additional instruction to the strong – mature believers – he’s already said:

- Don’t cause a new believer to stumble by using your freedom in non-biblical issues to offend them
- Don’t condemn your own convictions
- Doing something conscience says is wrong is sin for you

A. Our debt

New instruction – two-fold instruction for mature believers – 1) “Those who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength…” – Romans 15:1 – stronger in the Greek – “The powerful ones have a debt to those without strength to bear their weaknesses…”

- Strong contrast between the “strong” and the “those without strength” – same word – *dunamis* (dynamite) = power, force, ability, resources – can mean “to be strong enough to, be able to”\(^1\) – in the context this is the one with a clear conscience on eating meat – he has gained sufficient spiritual strength to break free from the trap of being enslaved to physical things – “those without strength” is the opposite – *adunamis* – without power, force, ability, or resources – this person hasn’t been taught and his conscience is captive to the past – he’s a slave to meat
- The strong “owe a debt” to the weak to “bear” their weakness – this is a spiritual obligation – the strong owe this to the weak
- The word “to bear” = “to pick up or carry” – involves a commitment of the will and an exercise of power – this means the strong will make a decision to carry the burden of the weak – lit. – They will exercise their power to pick up the burden of not eating meat for the sake of conscience

What does this look like – we’ve already seen that this means the strong won’t invite the new believer over for lunch and offer them a pork sandwich or meat that has been offered to idols –

B. Our goal

Second instruction for mature believers – Romans 15:1, 2 – “…not just please ourselves. Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.” – the ultimate goal of bearing the burdens of the weak – to please them – contrary to all natural instincts – natural propensity is to please self – me – opposite for the one who follows Christ

This is directed at the “strong” – hard if you are a “black and white” person – mature believers have an obligation to please the weak – Paul includes himself in this category – Romans 15:1 – “We who are strong…” – Romans 15:2 – “Let each of us please his neighbor…” – the obligation of the mature to the weak is clear

This “pleasing” does not mean being “nice guys” to accommodate people in their sin – we are not - furthermore we are not to be “men pleasers” by compromising on doctrine – Galatians 1:10 – “For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.”

This “pleasing” is a purposeful readjustment of our lifestyle to accommodate the conscience of a new believer in a way that will contribute to their spiritual growth – this doesn’t mean we cater to every whim of an immature believer or to the hardened opinions of long time Christians who want to hold everyone captive to their legalistic views – but it does mean we “…regard one another as more important than yourselves…” (Philippians 2:3)

This didn’t always happen in New Testament churches – Theologian Oscar Cullmann believes that some of the early Christian martyrs (including Peter and Paul) were killed because of jealous strife among the members of the church in Rome! – the rivalry was so bitter that some in the church of Rome turned in their opponents in the church as traitors to the Roman Empire – speculates that this rivalry led to persecution under Nero and Christians being fed to lions in the Colosseum2 - possible corroboration of this in Philippians 2 – remember Paul wrote Romans from Corinth around 56 A.D. – he wrote Philippians from Rome in 61 A.D. five years later – sending Timothy to them as his surrogate – commends him in Philippians 2:20-21 – “For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus.” – “they” must refer to other leaders in Rome – Timothy was the only one among them who didn’t seek after his own interests – when he wrote Romans 15 he had only heard of the division there – Five years later his letter to the Philippians indicates he had experienced the reality of the division

Do we see any of that at NorthCreek Church? – 21 years ago I hired a music director who played guitar and had long hair – offended some – wanted me to fire him – I didn’t – they left the church – held Christmas party – I was invited – Madrigal group invited to sing – woman told me “This is the kind of music we need at our church” – Really?!

II. THE EXAMPLE OF BURDEN BEARING

If you want an example of how to bear one another’s burdens, Paul says we can look no further than Jesus Himself – same Jesus who threw money-changers out of the Temple – twice – same Jesus who excoriated the Pharisees – Romans 15:3-4 – “For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.’ For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” –

17th century Puritan Thomas Brooks said, “example is the most powerful rhetoric”3 – Jesus’ example is stunning – Paul is not saying we are attacked like Jesus was – He is looking at the result, not the cause – Jesus was viciously attacked by unsaved religious leaders and secular authorities – Romans 15 isn’t referring to that kind of attack

Romans 15 is not even talking about an attack – the mature are not attacked by the weak – they just have a difference of opinion – but the result is potentially the same – Paul presents Jesus as the example of one who is “reproached” = “insult, slander, false accusations” – Jesus was insulted without cause – He suffered the ultimate insult – they killed an innocent man – Jesus was willing to go to the cross so that mankind might be saved – if He had not born the reproach of the ones who killed Him He would not have gone to the cross – the point is that Jesus did not please Himself but rather set out to please God for the benefit of others


- Psalm 69:4 – His enemies hated Him – “Those who hate me without a cause are more than the hairs of my head…” – Jesus quoted this in John 15:25 – He challenged their teaching, reputation, power – all by telling the truth

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• Psalm 69:8 – His brothers rejected Him – “I have become estranged from my brothers and an alien to my mother’s sons.” – Mark 6:3 tells us Jesus had at least six siblings – can you imagine living with an older brother who was perfect – and humble! – But John 7:2-5 tells us “...even His own brother did not believe in Him...”

• Psalm 69:9 – Insulted because of zeal for God – “For zeal for Your house has consumed me (John 21:17), and the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on me.” (Romans 15:3) – Jesus had such zeal for the things of God that He threw the entire commercial ventures out of the Temple twice – infuriated the leaders! – you might be labeled a “fanatic” or “radical” if you have zeal for God

• Psalm 69:11 – He was mocked – “When I made sackcloth my clothing, I became a byword to them.” – “byword” = “proverb” – mocking poem like kids on the playground

• Psalm 69:12a – The rulers conspired against Him – “Those who sit in the gate talk about me...” – the gate of the city is where elders sat – the insane jealousy of the Jewish leaders forced Pilate’s hand to crucify Jesus

• Psalm 69:12b – “And I am the song of the drunkards.”

Romans 15:4 – Paul tells us why the example of Jesus is so important – “For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” – Old Testament prophesied Jesus’ trials – but He conquered through resurrection – we model that

Paul is not suggesting the strong are slandered or insulted by the weak in the same way Jesus was – he is suggesting that the strong should be willing to sacrifice their opinion on a non-biblical issue if it will bring about spiritual growth in the other person

“Weaknesses” in Romans 15:1 is astheneia – used to describe physical weakness or sickness, financial trouble, physical appearance – church is full of weak people – some don’t know as much as you – abusive families – shy – wounded by church

We will not see eye to eye on all things in the church – if you are the kind of person who is sure you are right on everything, you won’t like this – we will have differences on doctrinal issues like church polity, eschatology, and spiritual gifts – we will also differ on hymns or praise songs – jeans or suits – KJV or ESV – celebrating holidays, movies, use of TV, Internet, social media, education for kids – how will we handle those who differ?

Parents know the importance of bearing the weaknesses of their children – picked last at recess – “best friend” doesn’t like them – bullied and called names – bitter tears and broken hearts – what do we do? – pile on? – find other faults?

III. THE REASON FOR BURDEN BEARING

Romans 15:5-6 – “Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” As he often does, Paul breaks into his instruction on a subject to pray – three part prayer:

A. The proclamation

God “gives perseverance and encouragement” – how? – Romans 15:4 tells us this comes through “the Scriptures” – the Bible gives us guidance on all the issues of life – none more important than how to live with each other

• “perseverance” – hupomene – two words – mene = “to remain” – prefix hupo = “under, behind” – also translated as “patience” – Paul is clearly thinking of how to deal with differences in the church – “hang in there” – don’t get exasperated with each other – you will have differences – don’t walk away – don’t retreat – don’t demonize a brother or sister just because they are different than you

• “encouragement” – parakaleo – “to come alongside” – John 14:16 – “I will ask the Father and He will give you another Helper...” – Holy Spirit is our paraclete – wonderful picture for this context – how much
we need people to come alongside – we are in a battle against the worldly system, against Satan and his dominion over the earth, and against our flesh – we do not need to be in a battle with each other

B. The petition

The petition – may God “...grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus...” – Romans 15:5 – this gives greater impetus to bearing the weaknesses of our weaker brothers – it’s Christ’s desire – the High Priestly Prayer in John 17 clarifies Jesus’ view – John 17:14-17 – “I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.” – we are in a battle – we can’t afford any “friendly fire” – John 17:20-21 – “I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.” – part of the reason the world doesn’t respond is because of the internal squabbles they see in the church

C. The purpose

The purpose – Romans 15:6 – “...so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” – The church is the bride of Christ – His pattern for living in this world is for the church to unify behind one voice – why doesn’t that happen?

- Sin – pride and self-centeredness
- Lack of biblical understanding
- Camping on pet doctrines
- Don’t know each other – need Community Groups – fellowship – serve

Does this make a difference? – mentioned this before – music “problem” got to elder board 21 years ago – Jim Bothel – “I like organ, hymns with every verse, coat and tie” – “But I don’t come to church to get what I want. I come to serve.” That’s what we need.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Who are the “strong” in Romans 15:1?

2. What are the “weaknesses” Paul is talking about in Romans 15:1?

3. What does “Christ did not please Himself” mean in Romans 15:3?

4. What is the purpose of bearing the weaknesses of other believers according to Romans 15:6?

5. What are some “weaknesses” you might be called on to bear?