

Building Up Your Brother

📖 Romans 15:1-3

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I received a couple of questions. Let me reiterate that I am pleased that you are asking me questions because I view this as a time of learning together. Let me also say that I don't get offended by questions. Some teachers don't like to get questions but when you ask me a question I always go back and search further and review things and come out with more clarity. So I'm thankful because it contributes to my spiritual growth. Also, if you don't ask a question when you have one it can become a hindrance to your enjoyment of worship, fellowship and spiritual growth here in this assembly and that's not good. That does not contribute to the upbuilding of this body of believers. We are here for enjoyment, fellowship and spiritual growth and that means we have to work through the text together. So keep up the questions.

Q1: If someone cannot refrain for the sake of a brother's weak conscience, now he's an addict. Does that person need intervention to not be addicted? Would that need to become a scruple for that person and now he's the weaker brother?

A1: Good questions. You're on the right track. There are three questions here. On the first question, generally, someone who is addicted to a substance/activity, whether it's food, drink, prescription drugs or playing video games, does need some kind of intervention. So you see I'm not limiting my answer to alcohol and drug use. Let me cover my bases here because I'm not sure what the questioner means by "intervention." There is a technical use of "intervention" that is referring to paying a professional to be involved as mediator in confronting the individual and trying to get the person some help. I'm not saying you should do that. I'm not saying you shouldn't do that either. It may be helpful. It may not. It is expensive. What I am saying though is that some kind of informal "intervention" is usually necessary and that would come under passages like Matt 18:15-18 where a brother sins and you go to him and if he is in denial then you bring another brother along with you and so forth and so on until there is some resolution. That's biblical intervention. Also, the Gal 6:1 passage which talks about coming alongside a brother who has stumbled into sin and needs help regaining his footing. That's another passage that supports biblical intervention. Another form of intervention is prayer, of course. So you are always praying and that's intervention because you're praying that God will intervene through this person's circumstances so that they come to the bottom of the barrel or want help. So that's another form of biblical

intervention. Another clarification I need to make is that I'm not talking about addictions to illegal substances/activities. Those things need to be dealt with under civil law. The police need to be brought into those matters. You shouldn't shield believers who are involved in criminal activity. So I'm not going to be talking about that but I am going to be talking about addictions to legal substances and activities where the person usually does need some kind of "intervention."

The bottom line here if you intervene is that the believer has to recognize they have a problem and want to get out. If they don't desire to get out, then you are just spinning your wheels and wasting a lot of time and money. So if they don't want out then you'll have to keep praying that they do want to get out.

On the second question, "would that need to become a scruple for the person?" Whatever they were addicted to would certainly have to become a scruple for them. In other words, they would have to come to view it as something that was trivial and not something they require for dependence. In my estimation, for them to get to that point would require them to completely abstain from that substance and all other similar substances for several years and perhaps for the rest of their life. Addicts tend to slide from one addictive substance to another and so they may have to just abstain, abstain, abstain.

On the third question, would they now be "the weaker brother?" Well, yes, in the sense that they could not enjoy that freedom. Remember, we're talking about amoral things here that have been taken too far and become sinful. So the person would have to come to understand that within the system of Christian doctrine such things are permissible in moderation but they are not always profitable, and in their case they may have to completely abstain for the rest of their lives lest they stumble into sinful excess. That's why in previous weeks I said that a key is living in balance. Keep everything in balance. Live in moderation.

So yes, they probably do need biblical intervention and perhaps professional intervention if that moderation would help, and yes, that thing would need to become a scruple for them and yes, in that sense they would be a weaker brother because they could not exercise that freedom. But there is nothing wrong with that. And once they are out of it we are to accept them as they are, scruples and all...

I'd like to add that I don't know what particular addiction the questioner is referring to and it may just be a general question but most people think in terms of being an alcoholic and alcohol can be very addictive but there are also other substances as well as activities that are addictive. Certain substances are added to our foods and non-alcoholic beverages that are addictive and becoming addicted to them is just as sinful as getting drunk. There are also substances in prescription drugs that are addictive and we live in a medicated society that is driven by money and creating perfect happiness and so all our problems can be resolved by taking some pill. In my estimation you need to be very wary of medicating because many substances in the drugs can create chemical dependencies and that is just as sinful as smoking pot. I don't care who ordered the prescription. You realize you're dealing in the medical field with pharmaceuticals and that it's business as usual, profit, the bottom

line is money. You are not their first order of concern; money is. So what I'm saying here is I'm not going to allow you to isolate one segment of society, say those who are alcoholics, and say, they have a problem and I don't. I'm saying you can be addicted to food, you can be addicted to non-alcoholic beverages, you can be addicted to prescription drugs. These are all substances that can be abused. Further, it's not limited to substances. It also includes activities that create addictive brain activity through feedback mechanisms. People can be addicted to video games, cell phones, movies, TV. Excessive activity in these areas is known to create neurological and chemical changes in the brain and people often need intervention on these things because the thing takes over their life. So don't isolate the problem to just people who drink alcohol. You may be addicted to food, movies, games or prescription drugs. Those are all things nobody wants to talk about but they are addictive too and you need to always check things out before you start taking some substance or doing some activity. This is where our culture has not been very wise. They have just said, take this pill. And people just blindly take it. That is not wise at all. Our culture is not wise. Everything in balance. I cannot say that enough.

Q2: I have always thought of the judgment seat of Christ as a place where I would be rewarded for my good works and punished for bad works/sin. You indicated that there would be no punishment for bad works/sin. Can you elaborate?

A2: Yes. This is a common area of misunderstanding so you're not alone. Here's the thing: sin and bad works are treated differently in Scripture. All sin was paid for by Jesus Christ. That is part of the gospel message. 1 Cor 15:3 "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve." Since He paid the penalty for all sin by His death on the cross there is no need for us to be punished for our sins at the judgment seat. The only issue there will be our works done in the body. That our works will be judged is taught in both the OT and NT. In the OT, Psalm 62:12, "For You recompense a man according to his work." The recompense is a kind of remuneration for the work done in the body. If there is good work then it will be rewarded. If there is bad work then it will simply not be rewarded. In the NT, 2 Cor 5:10, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." Good and bad will not be done to us but the good will be recompensed by reward and the bad will be recompensed by no reward. So loss of rewards is the issue on the bad side because the bad works are essentially missed opportunities in the sense that you had the potential to earn rewards by doing some good work by the Spirit but you didn't, you let that opportunity slip by. No punishment will be meted out for that, but you will have missed out on potential rewards. Rev 2:23, "I will give to each one of you according to your deeds." Again, there is a recompense for our deeds and this amounts to rewards for the good deeds and no reward for the bad deeds. That's the way you should think about the judgment seat.

The overwhelming sense when you go to the judgment seat should not be one of fear but of joy of meeting your Savior. He has paid the penalty for your sin in full and you have appropriated the gospel by faith and so the only issue will be what you have done in the body. The good will be rewarded, the bad will not be rewarded and consequently you will suffer loss in the sense of not gaining potential rewards. But again the overwhelming sense we should all have is one of the joy of meeting our Savior. Let me warn you that some Bible teachers and writers argue that certain passages that relate to the nation Israel in the gospels and talk about being beaten or cut in half refer to the Church and the judgment seat. I do not think these passages refer to the Church at the judgment seat or believers in general. I think they refer to Israel's judgment at the second advent and to the unbelieving portion of that nation. The important thing is to understand that you have certain talents and spiritual gifts and you want to use those under the filling of the Spirit for the glory of God. If we have an opportunity to do good works by the Spirit we don't want to miss those opportunities. Capitalizing on those opportunities will result in the greatest amount of rewards one can receive at the judgment seat of Christ. If you want to learn more about this I can recommend Dennis' series on rewards in the soteriology portion of his systematic theology which is in our audio library and I can recommend this book *Should Christians Fear Outer Darkness* by Dennis Rokser, Tom Stegall and Kurt Witzig. I have given my personal endorsement which is printed on the back of the book and so you know I agree with it.

We're now entering into Romans 15. It's a continuation of Romans 14. So it's a little unfortunate that the guy who gave us the chapter divisions while riding his horse across Europe put the break here. But before we go into Romans 15 I want to point out the big idea of this section. The Church is seen under many metaphors in the NT. It's a building, a bride, a body, etc... These metaphors capture the big ideas and set the context for the instruction. The metaphor used in this section is that the Church is a building. Jesus Christ is the one managing this building project and He is building it stone by stone each time a person puts their faith in Him. Unlike a building where each stone is static the stones that make up the church are living stones. Therefore, how each stone lives contributes to the overall strength of the building. So what is pictured here is that each of us is a strong or weak stone and we can contribute to strengthening the overall Church or to tearing it down. And our goal, of course, is to contribute to the strengthening by building up our brethren and not tearing them down. Notice the building metaphor in 14:15, "For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died." The word "destroy" is a deconstruction word. It's tearing down part of the building that Christ died to build. Notice the metaphor again in 14:19, "So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another." The word "building up" is a construction term. It's serving to strengthen the building in a positive fashion. And again in 14:20, "Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food." Obviously "tear down" is a deconstruction term and we are not to tear down but we are to build up. And so the easiest way for me to see what is going on here is to look at it from the building metaphor and to understand that Jesus Christ is like a construction manager building a project called the Church. Each person who has faith enters into this building as a living stone and

each stone is to contribute to the overall strength of the structure by building up his brother and not tearing him down. If you've ever constructed anything, it could be a blanket, it could be a house, it could be a piece of art, whatever, and you've put hours and hours into this project and then someone comes along and tears it up, you know how frustrating that is. If you know what that feels like you know what the Lord Jesus Christ thinks when you come along and tear up His work of building the Church. And that's why these chapters are so powerful and practical. The metaphor continues in 15:1-4 and particularly verse 2, the word "edification" is the same word from 14:19 translated "building up." We're supposed to be positively involved in the construction project.

How we do that, how we contribute to the overall strength of the building is by building up my brother and there are two principles in Romans 14 that should be followed. Romans 14:1-12 gives the first principle; *do not judge the weaker brother on their scruples* and the doctrinal basis for not judging on scruples is *the judgment seat of God*. We are all going to go to the judgment seat of God. How we build is important. We're going to give an account of ourselves and so on matters that are amoral, we should not judge. By the way, that does not mean that you should not judge on matters that are moral, we should judge those things. Paul is not dealing with moral things here but he does deal with them in 1 Cor 5, Matt 18:15ff, etc...and those things we must judge. But on the things that are amoral we shouldn't judge because to do so is to make an issue out of something that should not be an issue and for us to do that will result in us being judged at the judgment seat of Christ. So we want to follow all of Scripture and that will make for the most enjoyable experience at the judgment seat.

Romans 14:13-23 gives the second principle; *do not exercise a freedom in the presence of a weaker brother because it will harm him* and the doctrinal basis for refraining from a freedom is *the redemptive work of Christ*. Jesus Christ died for the weaker brother to save him so it is inconsistent for us to come along and harm him just so we can have our little toy. This is what I was talking about earlier about the fact that Jesus Christ is building the Church stone by stone and here is where we can contribute either to working with Him in constructing the building or to tearing down the building. The building metaphor is the big picture in these chapters and we want to do whatever we can to positively aid in the building up of the Church so that each living stone in the Church is stronger. This adds support to the overall structure.

Today we come to a third principle in 15:1-7; this one is positive, the first two were negative, do not judge your brother on his scruples and do not exercise a freedom in the presence of a weaker brother, but this one is positive, *do take on the burdens the weaker brother is carrying*. This is a responsibility the stronger believer is to take on and the doctrinal basis for it is that *Jesus Christ bore our burdens in His cross work* so we ought to bear our brother's burdens as well. This is imitating Christ and that's part of what we want to look at today. That contributes to the building. Then verse 4 will deal with suffering and that verse is an aside that Paul took when he mentioned verse 3, the sufferings of Christ. So verses 1-3 go together and verse 4 grows out of verse 3 and sort of stands alone.

In 15:1 Paul gives the positive command, **Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. We who are strong** are those who understand the system of Christian doctrine and in particular the doctrine that it was for freedom that Christ set us free (Gal 5:2). He didn't set us free to put us back into bondage. We were called into freedom and we are to use that freedom to serve one another in love (Gal 5:13). By the use of **we** Paul includes himself as one who was **strong**. And what Paul commands the strong is to **bear the weaknesses of those without strength**. The word **bear** is *βασταζω* and sometimes means "put up with, endure" in the sense of tolerate, and some commentators go that direction. Their idea is that strong believers ought to put up with weak believers and it's sort of like, "Okay you weakling, I'll put up with you." Like an older sister putting up with her little sister. But the word has another meaning, "to pick up, to take up, to cause to come to a higher position" and that is more like it. What Paul wants us to do for the weaker believer in the context is forego our liberty in order to pick them up, cause them to advance in their sanctification. Moo says, "Paul is not urging the "strong" simply to "bear with," to tolerate or "put up with," the "weak" and their scruples...what Paul is exhorting the "strong" to do is willingly and lovingly to assume for themselves the burden that these weak believers are carrying."¹ By "assume" their burdens he means forego the liberty. The liberties are trivial anyway, personal pleasures. They are not important but what is important is our weaker brother, the one for whom Christ died, the one who is part of the building Christ is building and we should never tear down that work.

Note the word **ought**. We **ought** to do this. **Ought** is a moral imperative. In other words, to not follow this is sin on the part of the stronger believer. Sin that needs to be confessed. Witmer adds, "**ought** (pres. tense, emphasizing continuing obligation; its first position in the sentence underscores its importance)..."² When an author in Greek placed the verb first in the sentence it was usually to emphasize. **Ought** is first in the sentence and so the emphasis is on the moral obligation that stronger believers continually have to refrain from the liberty and thereby help carry the weaker brother on to maturity. This is serving to increase the strength of the overall structure. The last clause of verse 1 is critical. Paul says, **and not just please ourselves**. It's an easy thing to **just please ourselves**. The thing for us is a good thing, eating or drinking, and we get pleasure out of it, but we should not have only **our** pleasure in mind. That is being selfish. Witmer says, "This last clause is the key; a Christian should not be self-centered, but should be concerned about the spiritual welfare of others."³ The spiritual well-being of our brother should be of utmost concern. The concept of not being selfish is found throughout Scripture. Paul said in Phil 2:3, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others." Putting others ahead of yourselves is Christianity 101; it's about looking out for others, not looking out for yourself. The world says look out for yourself. The Bible says look out for others. We've been called to serve one another and put their interests ahead of our own. Why? It's not entirely clear yet but lurking in the background of verse 1 is Christ's giving Himself for us, putting His interests ahead of our interests. But that is in Christ's mind because he directly refers to it in verse 3.

In 15:2 Paul continues, **Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.** By **neighbor** Paul is referring to our fellow weak believer. Who then is he referring to by **each of us**? Each of us is each strong believer. What **each** strong believer **is to do** is **please his neighbor.** Now this does not mean we are to be people pleasers. That's not the point. Elsewhere Paul condemns doing eye-service to be people pleasers (Gal 1:10; Col 3:22; 1 Thess 2:4; Eph 6:6). What is meant in context is pleasing weak believers by refraining from certain actions rather than simply pleasing ourselves. Constable says, "Paul was not saying that we should be "people pleasers" and do whatever anyone wants us to do simply because it will please them (cf. Gal. 1:10, 19; Eph. 6:6; Col. 3:22; 1 Thess. 2:4). The goal of our behavior should be the other person's welfare and spiritual edification (cf. 1 Cor. 9:19–23)."⁴⁴ It is interesting that Paul uses the term **neighbor** to refer to our weak brother. A neighbor is a close associate and by using this term we should immediately think of the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. That is the command that Paul has in the back of his mind when he chose this word. So the strong believer **is to please** the weak believer and this would mean to walk according to love (cf 14:15).

What Paul says next supports this approach. To do this for our **neighbor**, he says, **is for his good.** By the term **good** Paul means for his further sanctification. It helps build up the body. Paul then finishes the sentence with a purpose clause that refers to building. "for the purpose of" **edification.** The Greek word is *οικοδομη* and means "up-building, strengthening." It's the construction term for building a strong structure. When we forego a pleasure it contributes to the overall strength of the building called the Church since it strengthens our weaker brother and his place in the overall structure. If we went ahead and filled our own pleasure it would not do good to him but bad and it would tear him down and weaken the overall structure. That is what we do not want to do (cf 14:19-20).

In 15:3 Paul concludes this idea of not pleasing oneself and sets us up for the next idea in verse 4. **For even Christ did not please Himself.** Surely if any person had the right to **please Himself** it was **Christ.** But Paul says **even He did not please Himself.** This expression has in view His crucifixion. Jesus did not please Himself when He was crucified. The crucifixion was for the Father in order to pay the penalty for our sin. It was a humiliation and a horror. Hebrews 12:2 says that he endured it anyway, "for the joy set before Him [He] endured the cross, despising the shame." So horrible was crucifixion that in polite Roman society it remained unmentioned, only being referred to in passing by a kind of euphemism, *arbori infelici suspendito*, 'hang him on the unlucky tree.' To think that Christ went through such a horrible death to **please Himself** would be an absurdity. Christ went through the crucifixion to please the Father and by so doing pay the debt for our sin. The cross is the ultimate example of selflessness. Paul's point is that if even He did not **please Himself** but gave Himself up for us shouldn't we follow His example of not pleasing ourselves but giving up ourselves for the others for whom He died? Shouldn't we imitate Him? This is true imitation of Christ, not in the contemplative prayer sense that is so popular among mystical Christians and is really nothing more than eastern religion combined with Christianity. True imitation of Christ is living by faith so that His life is poured out through us. As Gal 2:20 says, "It is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me, the life I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave

Himself for me"? When we live by faith we give ourselves to others because it is Christ's life that is being poured out through us and He gave Himself to us.

Now to support this statement at the end of verse 3, Paul quotes from the OT. If you have a reference Bible where does Paul quote from? Ps 69:9. This is a Psalm of David. It is a Messianic Psalm meaning that while it is speaking of David many of the things in the Psalm look beyond David to the Messiah. David is sort of like a type of the Messiah in that his life has many facets that are paralleled by the Messiah's life. So what we are looking for is parallels. In the verse David says, "**And the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on me.**" In the context David was trying to build the Temple to please God and this resulted in many enemies insulting and despising him. In the same way many insulted and despised the Messiah even though He was seeking to please God. This thought, that David, looking forward to Christ, sought to please God and suffered reproach for it is what led Paul to shift in verse 4 to the sufferings of reproach we may have to bear due to seeking to please God and not ourselves. It is a brief aside and Paul has some great encouragement to give us.

Constable gives this wise conclusion, "Christians need to show as strong commitment to building up God's spiritual house as David displayed in promoting His physical house."⁵ How are you building?

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 866.

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² John A. Witmer, "Romans," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 494.

³ John A. Witmer, "Romans," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 494.

⁴ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ro 15:2.

⁵ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ro 15:3.