

Prayer for Unity

📖 Romans 15:4-7

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Q1: Aren't some deeds people do sins? Define deeds please.

A1: This question relates to the judgment seat of Christ and what will be under evaluation at that judgment. I made a distinction between sin and deeds in the sense that Christ died for all sins and so our personal sins will not be under evaluation at the judgment seat but rather our deeds. This is an accurate distinction but it may be an over-simplification and so some further clarification may be helpful. To answer your question directly, the English words "deeds" and "works" are common translations of the same word. This is the Greek word *εργον*. It has four meanings in the lexicon depending on the context. In contexts related to judgment the word means "that which displays itself in activity of any kind, *deed, action.*" Since it is activity of any kind then that activity can be either good or bad. I take it that good deeds are those done when we live by the Spirit and bad deeds are those done when we live by the flesh. These bad deeds are sinful but that may be an oversimplification because it does not answer why sin is not an issue at the judgment seat of Christ. Let me use an analogy to try and communicate this idea.

During our schooling we may have done good and bad and there were benefits to doing good and consequences to doing bad. When I was in school if you did bad they gave you licks and I got plenty of licks. Now I think they stick you in timeout or some other nonsense. But we were disciplined. But then came the day of graduation and on that day we all received our diploma. Nobody got licks. It was a day of joy and relief. However, there were some among us that graduated at the top of the class. They received special recognition and rewards above and beyond the diploma because of their good performance. The rest of us got our diploma but did not receive special recognition or rewards. As the valedictorian gave his/her speech we may have sensed some regret that we did not work harder and graduate nearer the top of our class but the overwhelming sense was joy because we had graduated. In the same way, when we are still in the mortal body we may do good and bad. When we do bad we are disciplined or chastened in order to get back in fellowship. One day we will be raised and will all go to the judgment seat. Nobody is going to be disciplined. It will be a day of joy and relief. However, there will be some among us who did good deeds by the Spirit and will receive special honor, recognition and reward for their good deeds. The rest of us will not receive the special honor and rewards and we may sense

some regret that we did not live by the Spirit and produce good deeds but the overwhelming sense will be joy because we have been raised and are with Christ.

In summary, when we live by the flesh the result is bad deeds or sin and in mortality God disciplines us for this sin but in immortality at the judgment seat God simply does not reward us for the missed opportunities while we were living by the flesh. So there are consequences both in mortality and immortality but they differ and so the lesson, of course, is that while we are mortal we want to be learning to live by the Spirit more so that the result in time as well as in eternity is greater blessing.

Last time in Romans 15:1-3 I developed the metaphor that the Church is a building because of the many times that construction words are used in Romans 14 and 15. The Church is a building that is under construction and the Lord Jesus Christ is the construction manager overseeing the project. This project began with His death on the cross so that He is the cornerstone of the foundation. The cornerstone, in the ancient world, was the first and most important stone laid down. It had to be perfectly level and perfectly square so that all the other stones in the foundation were also level and square. Since His death was perfect the cornerstone for this new building was laid perfectly. The rest of the foundation stones were made up of the NT apostles and prophets who received direct revelation from Christ and recorded this in the NT Scriptures. The building stones laid upon the foundation are now being laid one by one as individuals believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (cf Eph 2:20-22). Each stone that is added to the structure is a living stone and therefore how one stone behaves toward another affects the other stones in the building (1 Pet 2:5). Since Jesus Christ is the construction manager overseeing the project then we should contribute to the overall strength of the other stones by building up and not tearing one another down. In this context there are three ways we can tear down our brother. First, by not accepting him as he is with all of his scruples. These scruples are amoral things, they are not classified by God as sinful and we pointed out some of them. Things like women wearing pants, playing cards, donating blood, some people struggle with these types of things because of their conscience and others don't. If someone struggles with it we call it a scruple, something that bothers their conscience, but it's not sinful and the one who is not bothered by this is to simply accept the one who is as he is and if he does not he is tearing his brother down. The second way to tear down our brother is to tempt him to do the thing that is for him a scruple and that just causes him to violate his conscience and he should never do that. So to lay something in front of him or cause him to be tempted or stumble in this way is tearing our brother down and that is sinful. The third way to tear down our brother is to not bear his burden with him by refraining from partaking of the thing in his presence. It may be fine and is fine out of his presence but in his presence it tears him down and we should never do this. So it's amoral, scrupulous things that Paul is dealing with here in Rom 14 and 15 and obviously he wants us to have harmony on these things and not tear down our brother. By doing so we contribute to the overall strength of the building.

We saw in 15:1 the stronger believers (by stronger we mean the one who understands the system of Christian doctrine and in particular that he has freedom in these amoral areas and so he can partake or not), in the presence of a weaker believer who struggles with it, is not to partake. This will strengthen the one without strength. Paul says in the situation, don't just please yourself. It's an area of freedom for the strong believer so it is easy to please yourself but don't do that, take the weaker brother into consideration. In 15:2, each of us refers to the strong believer and each strong believer is to please his neighbor. The neighbor is the weak believer. So the strong is to please the weak and this means acting in accord with his conscience so that he doesn't stumble. Paul says this is "for his good" meaning for his sanctification, and to his edification, that is his up building. It makes him a stronger stone in the building that is the Church. In 15:3 he gives the preeminent example of not pleasing oneself; "For even Christ did not please Himself." If anyone had the right to please Himself it would be Christ but He did not please Himself. Everything He did He did to please the Father. He is the ultimate example of selflessness and the crucifixion is the ultimate act of selflessness. He bore reproach on the cross in order to please the Father. That reminded Paul of David bearing reproach for wanting to build the Temple and that's why Paul quotes Ps 69 and applies it to Jesus. David was seeking to please God by building the Temple, not himself and suffered reproach in the same way Christ sought to please the Father by dying on the cross, not himself, for it was a horrible way to die, and suffered reproach. And so just as Christ sought our ultimate good and well-being so we ought to have the same kind of concern for our brethren despite reproach that we may face because of it. It is to that topic that Paul now turns; bearing reproach for showing consideration for our brethren by refraining from anything that might cause them to stumble.

We have some tools to help us do this: 15:4 says, **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.** One of the tools we have at our disposal, is **whatever was written in earlier times.** What made Paul think of the earlier writings was his quote about David from Ps 69. What is Paul referring to by **whatever was written in earlier times**? He's talking about the OT. There are several things here. First, what's the OT? The OT is the 39 books of your Bible that begin with Genesis and end with Malachi. It covers about 2/3 of world history or about 4,000 years. Moses wrote Genesis about 1400BC but Job was written earlier than Genesis, after the Flood about 2100BC. Job records events around the time period of Babel in Gen 10 and 11. The end of the OT is Malachi and it was written about 440BC. So from beginning to end the OT was written over a period of about 1,700 years. That's what Paul means by **whatever was written in earlier times.** Second, how did the OT come into history? Paul's looking at the whole thing, all 39 books but you see that the whole OT did not just drop out of heaven in one piece but was revealed gradually over time to many prophets and in many ways. Part of this was to authenticate that it was indeed the word of God because if you have just one guy writing, like Muhammad or Joseph Smith, then you're just trusting one guy and a major problem with these religions is they are based on just one guy. And what if that guy is a fraud? The whole thing is a fraud. So it's a very weak foundation. But if you have a whole series of guys writing one book where each and every guy contributes what was revealed to him

and these guys' lives overlap so that their writings can be checked by the others to see if they are in agreement with what has been previously written and this kind of checks and balances goes on century after century then it becomes impossible for this book to be a mere human document. Heck, you can't even put 40 people in the same room and have them write a consistent document, much less spreading them out over 17 centuries. So this way of God revealing His word in the Bible through many different people over many centuries is what points to the Bible as the work of God. No other book that people claim is God's word has this characteristic. And when the NT times came the whole OT had come together as a single document and Paul simply refers to it as **whatever was written in earlier times.**

And what does Paul say the OT was written **for** in verse 4? **For our instruction.** It doesn't say it was written "to" us. We know it was not written "to" us, it was written "to" the nation of Israel through the prophets who were prosecuting attorneys on behalf of God and they called the nation to repent so they could be blessed. So it was not written "to" us. But it was **written for us**, meaning there are lesson plans embedded there that apply to us. That is why Paul says it is **instruction.** The Greek word is διδασκαλία and means "teaching." There are lessons for us that come through God's interaction with the nation Israel, as, for example, the example Paul just gave in the quote about David who wanted to build the Temple for God and had to bear the reproach of others for his desire. That was written for our instruction because we may have to bear the reproach of others for not being selfish but seeking to please others. So the OT has lessons for us. Turn to 1 Cor 10 to be reminded of this truth from another passage. "For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea;" He's talking about the Exodus. Verse 2, "and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea;"³and all ate the same spiritual food;⁴and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ." This was all during the Wilderness Wanderings. Verse 5, "Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness."⁶Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved." See, there was a lesson there for us. That lesson is? Do not crave evil things. Verse 7, another lesson, "Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, "THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND DRINK, AND STOOD UP TO PLAY." We won't go into all that that means but it was a lot of sexual immorality which is always connected with idolatry. Verse 8, "Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day."⁹Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents.¹⁰Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.¹¹Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come." So all this happened to them but it was for our instruction and we are to learn from them.

Now in our passage back in Romans 15 the lesson we are to learn from the OT examples like David are that sometimes we have to bear reproach for not serving ourselves and so Paul says the tool we use to bear it is **through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures** so that **we might have hope.** See, the OT shows examples of **perseverance** and through that **encouragement** so that **we might have hope.** So let's see

how this works. By **hope**, the word *ελπις*, is meant something you do not yet have but you are aiming to have. It is looking to have something in the future. And what is it you want to have in the future? You want to have pleased God. But it is difficult to keep pleasing God when people are reproaching you for trying to please Him and these people can be a big drag on your trying to do what is pleasing to Him. But we have the examples from the OT of men and women who sought to please God. Remember Noah? Noah built a ship on dry land, not just any ship, a ship 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet high and he did this to please God. It says they mocked and scorned him for such a stupid project. Noah had to bear the reproach of that. But he built it anyway. And in the end did it pay off? It paid off big time. Not only was the entire human genome saved but the entire animal kingdom genome was saved. The rest of the earth was destroyed and the evidence of that is the fossil record embedded in the entire earth, many sediment layers stretching for hundreds and thousands of miles, not caused by a local flood, a global flood. So there is an example from the OT of someone who bore reproach in order to please God and had to endure a lot of mocking and scorn in order to do so. He persevered and God was pleased and I hope that encourages you to persevere through the reproach others aim at you. That is what Paul means when he says these things were written for our instruction, that by **perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope**. Those things happened for you so that you would be able to persevere. **Persevere** comes from the word *υπομονη* and means "to bear up in the face of difficulty." Nobody said that what you were going through was going to be easy but what is said is that the events in the lives of the people were captured in the OT in order to encourage you to persevere. We have the example of Job, yes? Job had a nice wife, ten children, tons of money, he was extremely wealthy. Then one day his ten children were killed, all in one day, the house collapsed and they all died and what did Job do? Most people would blame God. They always blame God when bad things happen and when good things happen they pat themselves on the back. People are so fickle. Job wasn't like that. In the midst of his suffering Job blessed God. He knew that God had a plan. Then it got worse. Job got boils from his head down to his feet and he was having to scrape these boils and it was tremendously uncomfortable, his health was failing. But he still blessed God. Then it got worse. His wife came along and started reproaching him, telling him to curse God and die. So now the closest person in his life was abandoning him and still he would not curse God. And still it got worse because his supposed friends came over and they spoke a lot of nonsense about how Job had done something sinful and that was why God was allowing all this to come into his life. But still Job stood fast. What do we learn from Job? He was a man who persevered, who bore the reproach of many for trying to please God. And what is the end of Job's story. All was restored to him and much more. You see why that was written? To encourage you to persevere. You see how Noah and Job got through, you see how they bore up under the pressure and came out successful on the other side and you are supposed to be encouraged, to have hope that the same will be true for you. It may seem beyond reach, I know, but as long as you keep these great examples from the OT in mind you will be encouraged to persevere and you will get through it and God will be pleased. So don't give up, don't give in, keep your nose in this book and it will all be worth it.

Now, in 15:5, we find that ultimately it is God who gives you the perseverance and encouragement through the Scriptures but, of course, you're never going to get it if you don't spend time in the Scriptures. You must spend time in the word and sitting under sound teaching of the word. That is absolutely critical and if you leave that out of the equation you aren't going to make it because it's the word that God gives perseverance, the ability to withstand the pressure, and encouragement, the motivation to go on.

Now Paul is praying here so let's look at his prayer. **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 this is another thing God gives and it is for us **to be of the same mind.** The word means "of the same opinion, judgment" and he is referring to the things which make for harmony in the body. He says this many times to many congregations. He said to the Corinthians in his final farewell, "Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you" (2 Cor 13:11). It is important that we are like-minded. It is not good to have all sorts of opinions floating around. It is good to be of the same opinion, the opinion of the word of God and that is what brings unity. He said it also to the Philippians in a most excellent way, "make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose." It is essential to our unity that we be of the same thinking, the same worldview. Apart from that we are going to be having schisms among ourselves and that is not healthy. So Paul is praying that God would grant us to be **of the same mind.** But note that it does not stop there. It is not enough to simply agree. There are many groups who agree with one another and they are out to lunch in their thinking. We are to agree **according to Christ Jesus.** That means that Scripture is the standard for how we are to think. We are all to read the same book and come to the same conclusions. The Bible is meant to be plainly read and that is how we come to agreement. It is when a person has decided that he wants to think something else that he comes to the Bible and misinterprets it. He does that on purpose. It is not that the Bible is unclear. It is that the person's mind is unclear and they do not want to submit to the Scriptures so they distort the Scriptures. This is a very common thing. Various opinions about the Bible tell us nothing about the Bible but they tell us something about those group's orientation to the Bible. They don't want to listen to the Bible, they don't want to listen to God, they want to make up their own belief system. Anyway, we are all to agree and that comes when we submit to the plain reading of Scripture, accepting the fact that most of it is just ordinary literal language and some of it figurative literal language that points in a poetic way toward some ordinary literal thing and we are to discover that through study. That's how we are to come to agree on what the Bible teaches and in particular we are to agree on the fact that we are not going to tear down our weaker brethren but we are going to build them up.

Now an important aside of verse 6 is do you observe that Paul recorded his prayer for the Romans? This is a public prayer. What does this imply? It implies that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with public prayer. Some have got it in mind that all public prayer is wrong because they misinterpret the Scriptures in the gospels where Jesus condemned the Pharisees for praying on the street corners. But the point there was not to condemn public

prayer but ostentatious prayer, prayer that is flowery in language and draws attention to oneself. If I were to pray something like, "Oh God in heaven, how great thou art, thou art omniscient and omnipotent and omnipresent..." that would be the kind of ostentatious prayer that is more interested in you being impressed with me than anything else. That is condemned. But genuine prayer in public is not condemned. Paul prayed many written prayers and sent them to everyone to read. But someone will say, prayer is not for the people in the audience but only for God. That is also wrong. Scripture records hundreds of prayers and this teaches us that prayer has more than one purpose. It is for God, true enough, since He alone can answer prayer, but it is also for exhortation and teaching others how to pray. Those are certainly reasons Paul shared this prayer with the Romans. He didn't have to tell them his prayer but he did. Doesn't that encourage? He does the same thing six or seven times in the Book of Ephesians. From these prayers you can be encouraged and you can also learn how to pray. Aren't you glad there are prayers in Scripture? Aren't you glad for public prayer? You should be...

In 15:6 we come to the purpose clause and this is what I've been saying all along, on non-essential things we should be in harmony. Paul says it, **so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.** I understand there used to be a men's group around here called **one accord.** I would venture to guess that came from this verse. It's another mind word. It means to be of "one mind, one purpose, one impulse." They were studying the Bible so that they could be of **one accord.** That is what God wants. In the context it is referring to being of one accord with respect to amoral things, scruples and such. And if we can be of one accord on this concept then we can **with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.** It is the fundamental purpose of man to **glorify** God and we can do this individually but this is doing it corporately. This is doing it in the local assembly. They were struggling to do this at Rome because they were differing over food and drink and specific days. They were not on one accord on those things and so they were not glorifying God with **one voice.** That is not good. God wants us to glorify Him with **one voice.**

Glorify who? Not just God but the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This expression is identical to Paul's salutations in a couple of his letters (2 Cor 1:3; Col 1:3). It affirms the concept of the Trinity. God is Trinity and this means that God is one in essence and three in person. By essence we are referring to God's nature, His characteristics and in this respect we say there is but one God not three gods. This one God has one essence. Of the essence of God is that He is sovereign, righteous, just, loving, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, immutable and eternal. We remember that by the acronym SRJLOOOIE. It helps us recall the basic attributes of the one true God. In essence there is but one God. Now in person this one God is three; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. By person we are saying that within the one God there are distinct people. These people all share the same essence. They're not three different masks that God puts on. They are eternally distinct persons that have eternally distinct roles. For example, we see in Eph 1 that the Father is the architect of the plan of salvation, the Son is the executer of the plan of salvation and the Spirit is the applier of the plan of salvation. They are three distinct persons with three distinct roles in the one true God. They are not three gods. That is what Islam says of Christians, that we are tritheists. We are not tritheists. We are monotheists. But within that monotheistic God

there are three persons. We see two of them in this verse, the **Father** and the **Lord Jesus Christ** and we see a relationship between them. If the expression does anything it distinguishes two people; **the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**. When we read that God is **the God** of the **Lord Jesus Christ** we are looking at this from the standpoint of Christ's incarnation as a true human. From that perspective Jesus Christ has a God. He assumed that relationship because of the incarnation. Otherwise, how could Jesus say on the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" It did not mean that Jesus was not God. It meant that looked at from the standpoint of Jesus' humanity God was His God. So when it says **God of our Lord Jesus Christ** understand that **our Lord Jesus Christ** is being viewed from the standpoint of His humanity. Then we read **and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**. This is looking at the relationship from the standpoint of Christ's eternity. From that perspective the Father is the Father and the Son is the Son. The Father was eternally the Father and the Son was eternally the Son. The Father did not become a Father at the incarnation any more than the Son became a Son. They were both eternally Father and Son, they bore that relationship to one another and it is the fact that Father and Son are of equal essence that we say they are both part and parcel of the one true God. Well, all that to say that the one who is to be glorified in this case is the **God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**. And it is good to always go back to the Triune God who is one in essence and three in Person in order to be reminded of the God with whom we have to do and that He is the only conception of God that can account for all the universals and particulars and that while we cannot exhaustively comprehend Him since He is beyond our ability for reason to capture, yet He is truly knowable insofar as He has revealed Himself to us and we are to worship Him with one voice. That is what is so important.

15:7, **Therefore**, grand conclusion. **Accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God**. This is it. I don't care who you are, whether you have scruples or not, whether you are weak or strong, this is addressed to all of you, **accept one another**. In what way? Comparative adverb; **just as Christ also accepted you**. Technically it's **you**. The "we" is rare in the manuscripts. The best reading is "you." But it's clear either way what is in view: you accept me and I accept you with scruples or without scruples because Christ accepted you and Christ accepted me with scruples or without scruples. If He has accepted each one of us, then how could we not? On what basis would we not? If you have believed in Christ, you have His approval. That's it because when you believe in Him you are justified, you are declared righteous in God's court of law. So do not judge one another on scruples for we will all stand at the judgment seat of Christ and He will judge those matters. Now, glorify God with one voice.

And we accept one another **to the glory of God** Paul says. This accrues to His glory in the sense that we are reflecting His essence when we accept one another. That is all we can do. We do not share His essence but we can reflect His essence. When we accept one another we are like mirrors reflecting His acceptance back upon Him. So if we are not accepting one another we are not glorifying Him, we are not reflecting Him and we should want to reflect Him so that we approve of what He approves of, which means to accept one another.

In 15:8 Paul goes back to doctrines that relate to Christ and he has done this over and over and over. He keeps taking us back to the cross of Christ and forcing us to think through the practical ramifications of what Christ did for us. So what did Christ do? **For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy.** So two groups, **the circumcision**, which is the Jews, and **the Gentiles**, which are the non-Jews. Christ has become servant of both but on a different basis. This is another one of those reasons that there is a distinction between Israel and the Church. He served the Jews on the basis of the promises of God given to the Jews and He served the Gentiles on the basis of the mercy of God. So the two are treated differently and its important and helpful to realize this distinction and not just muddy the water up by saying there is "one people of God." I realize there is only one way of salvation and that is always by grace alone through faith alone in the promised seed alone but there are two different people of God in the sense that they have different nature and different purposes in God's plan. So don't confuse those or you will end up erasing about half the Bible. I'm always amazed how much of Scripture maintains consistently this distinction and has to be distorted in order to maintain the theological idea of one people of God....