

An Obligation for Good – Rom 15

Carrying on the previous context of our responsibilities within the family of God, to welcome those who are weak in the faith, and to build them up in the Lord, chapter 15 brings our attention to the example of Christ for us.

“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.” What does it mean to bear with the failings of the weak? Think of it in terms of a parent dealing with a child. If a child is truly ignorant about something, does the parent berate or rebuke the child for doing something they don’t know is wrong? Or what if a child is trying to figure out how to master some task. Do we expect flawless perfection from a beginner? No – or at least we shouldn’t. Rather, a parent or other adult will instruct and correct the child, letting them know what is right and what is wrong, and have patience as the child works toward mastery of the subject. The same thing goes for a young believer, someone weak in the faith. They may not know all the instructions God has given us as believers, or they may still be trying to master the application of this new life in Christ. In those cases, we are to be patient, bear with them as they learn, and help them in the process. Now, if that same child has been instructed, and knows very well what is expected, yet rebelliously disobeys, we would expect a parent to discipline the child for willful disobedience. Likewise, any believer who is knowingly, willfully disobeying God’s Word should be rebuked and corrected.

What about that second phrase – “and not to please ourselves.”? This really tells us (the strong or mature Christians) not to be self-centered. It might surprise you to know that even mature believers can struggle with this issue. But this instruction is given to “we who are strong.” Verse 2 picks this up, “Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.” We’re back to loving one another, the new commandment Christ gave, which is mentioned several times in the book of Romans. Our desire ought to be to help one another grow in the faith, to become more like Christ. Paul stated his own intentions and practice in 1 Cor 10:33, “Just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.” Just a few verses before that, Paul told the Corinthians “Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.” Our natural focus as humans is to do what pleases ourselves, what gives us an advantage – but in Christ we are to put the needs of others before our own. In fact, that is the example Christ Himself gave to us. Look at v. 3 – “For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.’”

How did Christ not please Himself? He received the rebukes, disbelief, and scorn of His own people. Though He was perfect and sinless, He took our sin, our guilt, and paid the full price for us – He died. If He did what pleased Himself, He would have avoided the cross, and all the suffering and shame that came with it. Instead, because He loved us, He died in our place, taking our reproaches on Himself, so we could receive the Father’s forgiveness. This was foretold – “as it was written” Psalm 69:9. This brings us to another important point in living the Christian life – the use of the scriptures.

“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” This tells us two basic things the scriptures do for us – they instruct us and encourage us/give us hope. What are some of the things that Paul would have recognized as being written in the former days? That encompasses the entire Old Testament, so we might look at the sin and failure of Adam and Eve, and be encouraged at God’s grace in providing them a covering for their sin, and a way to be reconciled to Him even though they were expelled from the Garden. We might look at Noah, who faithfully preached for 120 years while he

prepared the ark, yet no one believed him except his immediate family. Perhaps we could look at Abraham, the friend of God and father of the faithful, who stumbled on occasion, yet God patiently taught him and made a covenant with him. What about David, the man after God's own heart, and the great king of Israel, who then committed adultery, tried to cover it with murder, yet when he confessed his sin, God blessed him so that the Messiah would come from his family line. We could go on for days. The point is that God gave us the scripture, and all the stories which include both the successes and failures of His people, in order that we would learn from them and be encouraged, have hope to get us through the difficult times in our own lives.

But it isn't just for our own benefit – remember the earlier admonition not to please ourselves. Look at v. 5-6, "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." What is our purpose? To glorify God. How are we to do it? By living in harmony with one another, by joining our voices together in praise of His goodness. By helping one another live lives which please Him.

The passage finishes by connecting us back to the original instruction from ch. 14 – "Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." Think about what this means. You and I were welcomed by Jesus Christ when we were sinners in need of forgiveness and grace. He granted us that blessing, and transformed our lives. Now, as followers of Christ, we are told to welcome others who are weak in the faith – not to dispute with them about matters of personal opinion, but to help them in learning what it means to walk in faith. Then together we can worship and praise God for His goodness and grace, and encourage one another to glorify Him. That's what the church should be about.