

People of Hope

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Preacher: Peter Dickson

[0 : 00] Well, we're going to read now. So if you pick up your Bibles, we're going to be reading in Paul's letter to the Romans. And chapter 15, I think that is page 949.

Page 949, if you have one of our church visitors' Bibles. And here we are towards the end of this long letter of Paul.

We studied the whole letter together some years ago. But we're reading here these first 13 verses. And you will note the great theme of hope.

Paul the Apostle says to the church, We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak. And not to please ourselves.

Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.

[1 : 12] For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, That through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures, 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.

Therefore, welcome one another, As Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcision, To show God's truthfulness.

In order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, And in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy, As it is written, Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, And sing to your name.

And again it is said, Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people. And again, Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, And let the peoples extol him. And again, Isaiah says, The root of Jesse will come, Even he who arises to rule the Gentiles.

In him will the Gentiles hope. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, So that by the power of the Holy Spirit, You may abound in hope.

[2 : 49] Amen. May God bless to us his word. Thank you very much for the welcome.

And thank you to those of you who pray regularly for this work, About which we've just been praying, As Willie led us in prayer. This work, Strategic Ministry, Reaching Students, With the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Do pray for us in that, For the staff and really workers. And we value your prayers very much. It is a genuine fact that not a month goes by without us hearing through the network of Christian unions throughout the UK of people coming to Christ.

And you would recognize the reality of that here as you serve and work with students in Glasgow. And many of you indeed will have come to faith through the work of the Christian union and led to Christ by your friends at university.

So do pray for us. And thank you for those prayers. Well, let's turn to Romans chapter 15. And I want to ask a question at the beginning. Based on the last verse that was read to us.

[4 : 07] Verse 13 of chapter 15. This rather lovely benediction that forms the prayer in verse 13.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him. So that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

May the God of hope lead you to overflow with hope. And the question is this. What does it look like to be people of hope?

We can quickly imagine what it looks like to be people of love or people of joy or people of prayer. What does it look like? What does it mean to be people of hope?

And maybe, I hope, by the end of our short time looking at these verses, we might have one or two thoughts about the answer to that question. Before we turn to the text itself, two introductory thoughts.

[5 : 14] The first is something I always like to say when I turn people to the letter of Paul to the Romans. Because as soon as you turn to the letter of Paul to the church in Rome, your mind probably fills with thoughts along the lines of this being one of the most magnificent letters of the New Testament.

It is a massively dense description and exposition of the gospel. It's a letter which has stretched the minds of God's people over many centuries.

It's a letter about which many oceans of academic ink have been spilt. Probably most of them needn't have bothered being spilt.

But there we go. And what I like to say is that this letter of Paul to the Romans was not written for academics. It was not written to be the most, you know, superlative, dense description of the gospel in the New Testament.

It was written for ordinary believers like you. The letter of Paul to the church in Rome was a letter to Christian men and women who needed to understand the gospel and needed that gospel to be applied to their lives that they might take that same gospel out beyond Rome itself.

[6 : 42] It was written for them, for you. And so whenever you turn to the letter of Paul to the Romans, don't be overwhelmed. Just be glad that it was written for you.

So that's my first introductory thought. And I have two introductory thoughts. The second one concerns this passage in chapter 15, which forms, as it does, the conclusion of a section of the letter in which Paul describes the behavior of the weak and the strong.

If you look back at chapter 14, your Bible will probably have a subheading at chapter 14 that says the weak and the strong. And throughout chapter 14, Paul is discussing this issue that was a live issue in the early church, the weak and the strong.

And in particular, the issue that was being discussed and debated and disagreed about was the issue of whether or not Christian people should eat the meat that has been sacrificed to an idol.

And some said, yes, it's fine to eat it. They were largely the Gentile believers in this Christian community. And others said, no, no, no, we shouldn't eat meat which has been sacrificed to an idol.

[8 : 12] And they were largely, in this instance, the Jewish believers of the Christian community. And so there was this difference of opinion and this disagreement about how Christians should behave in this particular matter.

And it's a very real thing that not just with this issue, but with many issues, we can subdivide into those of weak or tender faith, tender conscience believers who don't feel comfortable doing certain things that other stronger or maturer or more assured believers feel absolutely fine about, the weak and the strong.

And that is a very real difference that lies between genuine believing people, the weak and the strong. And my introductory thought is that we must not be confused here between the genuinely weak Christian and the artificially weak Christian who puts on an air of weakness to become as strong as an ox.

Let me explain. You get the kind of Christian who says, oh, no, no, no, I could never be part of this church. My conscience wouldn't allow it. If you go ahead with that, I'll need to leave.

That is not a weak believer in Paul's use of the word. That is just a badly behaved believer who is manipulating a whole church fellowship and whose supposed weakness is actually being used in very strong ways.

[9 : 58] And what Paul is speaking about here is genuinely weak Christians who are upset and distressed at the thought of their brothers and sisters in Christ eating this meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

Genuinely weak believers. So those are my two introductory thoughts. But now as we turn to the text of chapter 15 itself, let me introduce you to three enduring and central fundamentals that Paul speaks about to wrap up his discussion of this matter.

We who are strong, he says, ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.

For even Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me. We sung that hymn of Christ in the garden, bearing our sorrows.

And here in the text, Paul is reminding us of how our Savior bore the insults. Remember people hurling these insults at him on the cross.

[11 : 20] You know, if you're any kind of Savior worth speaking about, come and save yourself and get down off the cross. And the Lord Jesus bore with our failings and did not please himself, but stayed there.

And Paul here uses his willingness to bear with our weaknesses for our sake as an example.

Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up for even Christ did not please himself. So, the first central fundamental of Christian living in this regard is the fundamental truth of Christ's death, suffering and death on the cross.

That's the first place Paul goes to wrap up this conversation, this topic. We do need to rescue the word fundamental. It's become a bad word because of the word fundamentalist.

But think of it this way. A fundamental thing is a necessary base upon which everything else can stand.

[12 : 40] It is a fundamental truth that this building has to have a good foundation underneath it to hold it up.

The foundation is fundamental to the safety of the building. Just as the cross and the suffering of the Lord Jesus Christ here in Romans 15 is fundamental to our being able to relate to one another in a Christian manner.

And how wonderful it is that as Paul seeks to encourage these Roman Christians to bear with one another, he takes them back to the cross of Christ as their fundamental touchstone of how to treat each other.

Let me at this point break in because there are probably very few of you who have been at loggerheads with other Christians as to whether or not to eat meat which has been sacrificed to idols.

Although it is possible that some of you have faced that issue. And the more international and the more cosmopolitan a gathering of believers, the more likely it is that that is a live issue.

[14 : 00] We did have a couple in our church in Aberdeen for whom when they got married that was a very real issue because they had both been converted to Christ out of fairly strong and militant Hinduism.

And both of the husband and the wife in the Christian couple had been sorely rejected by their families. And since they got married, they had begun to relate once again to the families which had rejected them.

And they were beginning to attend family gatherings again. And of course, this very issue came up. But should we eat the meat that has been sacrificed at the Hindu shrine that we know is in the family house?

And in that particular case, Roe, the husband, was strong and Rita, the wife, was weak. And she didn't really want, didn't feel comfortable eating at all.

And he was saying, oh, it's just meat and the idol's just dead anyway. So let's just eat it. You can see the issue for them. But probably not judging by your faces for you.

[15 : 11] But we would have similar reactions to all manner of different things. If some of us were to leave church this evening and head off to Starbucks and buy coffee and eat sandwiches there and so on, so on, so on, some of us would feel perfectly free to do that on a Sunday and wouldn't think twice about it.

All good things are given from God to be enjoyed. And others amongst us would be really uncomfortable with that. Because our view of Sunday is that we just don't feel right doing that, going to fund secular business world on a Sunday.

And that is an issue of weak and strong, not right and wrong. Some of you may leave church this evening thinking, oh, I felt most uncomfortable that there was a preacher without a jacket on.

And some of you... It's our weak brother. And some of you wouldn't have actually noticed unless I had commented on it.

And those are trivial examples. But many such examples where we struggle to find agreement. What would you say?

[16 : 34] What would you do if your close Christian friend was going to get to know and get married to a non-Christian, an unbeliever?

You've met someone at university, they're a Christian, and they've struck up a friendship with someone who's not a believer, and now they're going to get married. And you're heartbroken about it, perhaps, and longing that they wouldn't do this.

And they invite you to the wedding. And some would say, I just can't go. It would just feel as if I'm approving when I know I'm not. And somebody else would say, oh, I'm quite happy to go.

I want them to know that I care about them and love them, even though they're going ahead with this. It's an absolutely parallel example, the weak and the strong.

And it's not the right and the wrong. And in these cases, Paul begins to wrap up his discussion by saying, go back to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ and behave towards one another where you differ, in the way that Christ behaved.

[17 : 45] For even Christ did not please himself. But as it is written, the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me. Second, enduring, fundamental, not this time the cross, but the scriptures in verse 4.

Look at verse 4. 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.

Go back to the scriptures, he is saying to them, because from that well of truth provided for you will come endurance and encouragement and thus hope.

From the scriptures, as you struggle to find unanimity on this issue of eating meat or not, from the scriptures as you are aware that weak and strong are rubbing up against each other and in danger of hurting and defending each other, from the scriptures you will find instruction and thus you will find endurance and encouragement and thus you will have hope.

The second picture of a fundamental that we could adequately apply here is that of a central core of truth or a central core of structure around which other things are placed.

[19 : 36] A bit like a spiral staircase. The actual steps that you stand on are all attached to a central pillar or core.

And in this sense, Paul is saying to them, the scriptures given to you are fundamental to you having encouragement and endurance, the ability to keep going, whatever the disagreements and divisions and opinions that are alive and well amongst you, from the scriptures you will get encouragement and endurance and hope.

And it's always the case, isn't it, that gospel believers, evangelical people, have gathered around a view of the scriptures that holds the scriptures in a certain regard.

And we gather around those scriptures jointly submitting to their truth, even where we struggle and differ in certain matters.

Particularly matters like this, where there are weak and there are strong. But Paul takes them to the cross and to the scriptures.

[20 : 54] And thirdly, he takes them to the work of the Holy Spirit in verses 5 and 6. Verses 5 and 6. May the God of, and he uses the same two words that he used in verse 4, endurance and encouragement.

So, may the God of endurance and encouragement, which comes from the scriptures, 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.

So, if God is going to grant you to live in harmony together, that, I want to say, is the work of the Holy Spirit in the midst of God's people, isn't it?

The NIV actually uses the word spirit. It is with a small s, but nonetheless, the sense of God's work is there when it says, may the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity amongst yourselves.

So, a God-given gift of spiritual unity must be a work of the Holy Spirit amongst believers.

[22 : 20] believers. And, what I want to show you is that that God-given gift of unity amongst believers comes from and goes hand in hand with a willing obedience to the command that Scripture gives us to be united to each other.

So, God gives us unity and we commit ourselves to being united. And there's no contradiction between those two things. I want to look at just two or three or four other verses with you.

Now, I'm fairly allergic to too many cross-references in a sermon, but I'm going to force you to look at three, perhaps four, cross-references here.

So, do bear with me and turn back a couple of pages to Romans chapter 12, verse 16. I have very vivid memories.

Maybe this is where my allergy came from of an elder at church standing to take the Bible study and he always had about 63 little bits of white paper sticking out the top of his Bible and you just knew that every one of those was a cross-reference and you might die before you got to the end of the last one.

- [23 : 49] So, only three or four, but Romans chapter 12, verse 16. As a clear command of the apostle, live in harmony with one another.

Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Live in harmony with one another. Command. Flick forward a couple of pages now to 1 Corinthians chapter 1, verse 10.

Here Paul uses the word appeal, but it is a kind of command, isn't it? An appeal. I appeal to you, brothers, verse 10, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, so added force, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.

That's a very strong statement, isn't it? An appeal for no divisions, perfect unity in mind and thought.

Look at 2 Corinthians chapter 13, verse 11. The end of the letter of 2 Corinthians, verse 11.

- [25 : 23] Finally, brothers, goodbye. Aim for perfection. Listen to my appeal. Be of one mind. Be of one mind. And finally, Ephesians chapter 4, verse 3.

Last one, although I have another three written down, but I'm not going to punish you any further. Ephesians chapter 4, verse 3. Similar commandment.

Make every effort. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

So there you are. Four, and I could give you many more, commands towards unity in mind and thought without division amongst the brothers and sisters in the church.

And yet here in chapter 15, we have a description of God giving a spirit of unity. Now, which is it? How will God give us a spirit of unity?

- [26 : 26] Is some spirit of unity going to descend upon the gathering that will suddenly erase all differences of a thought between us and magically produce one mind?

No, of course not. Of course not. God gives us a spirit of unity as we obey the Scriptures and seek to be united. And that kind of pattern of a God-given quality and our obedience and commitment to it going hand in hand is everywhere in the New Testament.

God will give us a united mind as we commit ourselves to be united. And as we commit ourselves to unity, so God will honor us with giving us a spirit of unity.

You see, both belong together. The work of the Holy Spirit and obedience to the Scriptures don't ever separate those two things out. and that fundamentally is where Paul takes the Roman believers to get past this issue of the weak and the strong and whether or not to eat the meat.

The cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Scriptures written for our encouragement and endurance and hope and the work of the Spirit producing within the believers a commitment to unity.

- [27 : 57] All so that, as he says in verse 6, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He's saying to them, I don't want the church in Rome to be a Gentile club and a Jewish club praising the name of the Lord Jesus Christ in two different ways.

No, I want you to be one, one church. That was always the whole point of the gospel. Therefore, he says in verse 7, welcome one another, Jewish believers, meat avoiders, welcome the Gentile believers, the meat eaters, as Christ has welcomed each of you for the glory of God.

Let your relationships together be a display of how God has treated you. These three fundamentals, how wonderful to remind ourselves of them tonight, the cross, the scriptures, the work of the Spirit.

And what happens in the rest of the passage is that Paul goes on to speak about one world being summoned to praise.

[29 : 17] This is verses 8 to 12. This is just the age-old aim of the work of God to produce Jews and Gentiles together worshipping the one true God.

And it's almost as if in verse 8, Paul for the benefit of the Jewish believers who were harping back to their Old Testament laws as a reason not to eat the meat.

And that's often where weak Christians go to underline some of their shibboleths and legalisms. We go back to Old Testament laws.

And Paul is saying, no, no, no, the Old Testament was all about Gentiles and Jews coming together. He says, I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised, to you Jewish people, to show God's truthfulness in order to confirm the promises given to Abraham and the patriarchs.

And the whole point of that, verse 9, was that the Gentiles would glorify God for his mercy. The whole point of God coming to the Jewish race was so that the Gentiles might know God with them.

[30 : 38] And then Paul goes on to prove this from the very scriptures that they're wanting to go back to all the time. And here is my mandate for giving you cross references because Paul does it.

For, therefore, he says, I will praise you among the Gentiles. Psalm 18, the song of the king. Who would ever have thought it?

I will praise you, O God, among the Gentiles. No, no, no, David, you must have meant I'll praise you among your people. No, I will praise you among the Gentiles.

Again, it says in Moses' song in Deuteronomy, rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people. Paul is saying to them, don't, don't, don't disappear from one another into different groups and factions.

The whole point of the gospel, if you read it, in the Old Testament was that you would come together. And again, in Psalms, Psalm 117, praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples.

[31 : 42] And Isaiah, the root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations. The Gentiles will hope in him.

Wonderful. So this church fellowship exists, weak and strong together, just as the church in Rome, so that in our harmony around the gospel, our unity shaped by the cross, and taught by the scriptures, scriptures, and worked at, with the gift of the Spirit, our unity might declare that we are all summoned to praise, along with all the nations.

There is a bigger purpose, Paul is teaching the Romans, don't get hung up about eating meat, not eating meat. Don't get hung up about that.

There is a much bigger purpose. to glorify the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the goal of all that God has ever done.

Don't get divided from each other over issues of weakness and strength, immaturity and maturity. No.

[33 : 13] Look up. Remember, the goal of the scriptures was to bring people together to praise the name of the living God. If you go back just to the end of chapter 14 in verse 22, there's a very wise verse written here.

The faith that you have, and what he means there is the level of confidence that you have whether or not to eat the meat.

The faith that you have, if you're weak and you can't eat the meat, okay, if you're strong and you can't eat the meat, okay, whatever faith you have, keep it between yourself and God, he says.

It's almost as if he's saying, never mind that. Just let that be between you and God. So if your sister goes off to Sainsbury's to do their shopping just now and you're about to have a heart attack, Paul says, zip it.

Keep that between you and God. You see? Why? Because Christ lived so as to please others, not himself, to build them up.

[34 : 38] Why? Because the scriptures will give you hope and encouragement and endurance. Why? Because the spirit will bring you to unity with your brother or sister.

My paraphrase of chapter 15 verses 1 to 13 is, get over it. It's brief but memorable.

But that's really how Paul wraps it up. And how often would he want to say that to us when we're in a lather about something or another in the Christian world?

And the scriptures would say, just get over it and think of the eternal purposes of the glory of God. What does it look like to be a people of hope who are looking forward to the days we've been singing of all evening when we shall live with Christ and all sin shall be gone and all darkness shall be gone?

What does it look like to be brothers and sisters in the Christ who will take us to his home? well it looks very like people who get over it when the it is something that would divide us from one another.

[36 : 08] Amen. Let's pray for a second. Dear Heavenly Father, in your goodness and grace, your scriptures are so real, so pointed, so living and so true.

Thank you that these people in Rome so long ago heard these words and were called to respond to them for the sake of the gospel. Help us Lord to respond to your voice now.

To respond in your presence and in prayer and in praise. For Jesus' sake.

Amen.