

## Romans: Our Practice | Let's Live With Purpose, Romans 15:8-33

March 21, 2021 | Matthew McNutt

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We are nearing the end of our time in Romans! Today we are looking at Romans 15. Romans 15 is where Paul is pulling together the message of this book and driving his point home by focusing on two ideas in particular, **unity and mission**, before giving some closing greetings and instructions in Romans 16.

Let's pick up where we left off last week:

*Romans 15:7-9a (NLT) <sup>7</sup> Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory. <sup>8</sup> Remember that Christ came as a servant to the Jews to show that God is true to the promises he made to their ancestors. <sup>9</sup> He also came so that the Gentiles might give glory to God for his mercies to them.*

“Accept each other just as Christ has accepted you.”

Why did Christians need to be told this?

As we have seen over the course of this study on the book of Romans, things were not simple in Rome. The Jewish Christians, men and women who were ethnically Jewish and had converted to Christianity, saw themselves as the leaders in the faith. After all, from their perspective – and I agree with this part of their assessment – Christianity was not a new religion, it was the fulfillment of the faith their people had followed for centuries. It was their ancestors who had heard directly from God, they were the chosen people, and Jesus Himself was a Jewish man with Jewish disciples. Their educations growing up involved memorizing large swaths of what we call the Old Testament. The trap that some of the fell into was believing that they were therefore the better believers and the natural leaders.

The Gentile Christians, men and women who were NOT ethnically Jewish and had converted to Christianity, felt some frustration over this treatment. It essentially resulted in them being treated as second-class Christians. If there was a difference of opinion over theology, practice, whatever – the Jewish Christians treated them as though they were automatically wrong.

Throughout Romans Paul has been confronting this tension. It's created some tense weeks for us as well as we have had our own lack of acceptance of one another exposed at times.

Which is why Paul opens with this word, “Therefore.” This is the culmination of teaching that has already come. Accept each other just as Christ has accepted you! He reminds them again that Christ came to BOTH the Jews and the Gentiles. And over the

next few verses he quotes four different Old Testament passages that explicitly reference God's desire to reach the Gentiles. As much as some may have felt otherwise, it had never been about just one people group. God's desire was, and is, for the world.

In verse 13, Paul continues this thought:

*Romans 15:13 (NLT) <sup>13</sup> I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.*

How do we accept each other? How do we find unity in our diversity? Thankfully, our source for that ability is not ourselves. God is the source of hope, the source of joy, the source of PEACE. It is through Him that we are able to be filled with hope and joy. As our hearts are transformed more and more like Christ, we become people who overflow hope and joy, and the natural response to that is peace. I'm not talking about the world around us, but internally.

When you see the person exploding in anger in the car next to you because they didn't get through the light before it turned red, are they really that upset about the light? When someone rips into the person working the register at the store over the mask policy, are they really angry with that individual? That anger is coming from something else, isn't it? It's getting backed up, pent up, to the point of overflowing on anyone in their path.

What do I mean by overflow? When a cup is filled to overflowing, it overflows what is inside it. We're the same way. If we are filled with hope, joy, and peace, that's what we will overflow. If I'm allowing God's peace to fill me in the midst of all this chaos, this sinful world, in the midst of disagreements, debates on politics, I will overflow hope, joy, and peace. That's how we build unity.

Even as Christians, unity doesn't come naturally for us. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC) at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary there are approximately 41,000 Christian denominations and organizations in the world today.<sup>1</sup> Can you believe when Paul wrote this letter to the Romans there was only one? We find it easier to split when we disagree than to find unity in diversity. We even call ourselves Protestants because we protested and split off of something else. While the reasons were warranted, it is strange to me that even in taking on that label we subtly celebrate disunity.

Throughout Romans, Paul challenges these Jewish and Gentile Christians to pursue unity, even at the cost of personal freedom at times. Paul's message wasn't to find the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.learnreligions.com/christianity-statistics-700533#:~:text=Number%20of%20Christian%20Denominations,organizations%20in%20the%20world%20today.>

church that lines up closest with what the individual wanted – it was to sacrifice for the sake of others' faith development.

I want to skip ahead for a moment in Romans 15; Paul gives a very practical way for these early believers to choose unity.

*Romans 15:25-27 (NLT) <sup>25</sup> I [Paul] must go to Jerusalem to take a gift to the [Jewish] believers there. <sup>26</sup> For you see, the [Gentile] believers in Macedonia and Achaia have eagerly taken up an offering for the poor among the believers in Jerusalem. <sup>27</sup> They were glad to do this because they feel they owe a real debt to them. Since the Gentiles received the spiritual blessings of the Good News from the believers in Jerusalem, they feel the least they can do in return is to help them financially.*

At first glance, this just seems like a nice gesture. These Gentile believers have resources they are able to share with Jewish believers who are significantly struggling. Our church sends gifts to other ministries and churches without a second thought; it's the right thing to do, God tells us to give to those in need.

But Paul is actually reinforcing something he has been saying throughout the letter to the Romans: there are no second-class Christians. We are all one body.

In the culture 2000 years ago, accepting this gift carried significant symbolic weight. Dr. Paul Achtemeier writes in his commentary on Romans, "The gift is therefore a gesture of unity and equality. Accepting the gift is therefore tacit admission by the Jewish Christians that Jews and gentiles now stand on equal footing with respect to each other."<sup>2</sup>

Paul was driving home once again what he wrote to the Galatians:

*Galatians 3:28 (NLT) There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

All of the ways we classify ourselves are gone, there is just one thing that matters: we are one in Christ Jesus. Unity.

John Chrysostom, a fourth century church father, wrote about Romans 15:

*Christians joined in close unity give special glory to God. So even if you are troubled and at odds with your brother or sister, remember that you will glorify your Master by letting go of your anger; if not for the sake of your brother or sister, at least be reconciled for the sake of the ideal of unity. Indeed, let this be the primary reason for being reconciled.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, *Romans: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), Kindle location 4452.

<sup>3</sup> J. Patout Burns and Constantine Newman, *Romans: Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), Kindle location 7258.

**WHY** is this issue so important? Why is it so critical? Why is it worth sacrificing personal freedoms and preferences for?

Unity reflects a higher perspective, a greater confidence, it enables believers **to both see and pursue** the mission we have all been called to. Tim Keller writes,

*Gospel unity within the church and gospel mission to the world: these are two of the great themes of Romans, and two of the great passions of Paul's ministry.*<sup>4</sup>

The gospel mission to the world is Paul's driving message; the fruit of unity is the mission! We are called to live with a purpose, to live on mission. And one of the greatest distractions from that mission is disunity! In Romans 15, Paul sums up his calling, a calling we each share:

*Romans 15:14-20 (NLT) <sup>14</sup> I am fully convinced, my dear brothers and sisters, that you are full of goodness. You know these things so well you can teach each other all about them. <sup>15</sup> Even so, I have been bold enough to write about some of these points, knowing that all you need is this reminder.*

I love Paul's encouragement here. Yes, he has had to call them out on areas they need to grow in, but he is convinced they are full of goodness. Yes, we as a church, as we have looked through these passages have pulled back the curtain on areas we need to work; areas of race, of politics, of failures to love others and put others first as God calls us to. Even so, Paul is confident that they are headed in the direction of what he is challenging them to, just as the leaders of this church are confident that we as a body are headed in the direction we are called to.

*For by God's grace, <sup>16</sup> I am a special messenger from Christ Jesus to you Gentiles. I bring you the Good News so that I might present you as an acceptable offering to God, made holy by the Holy Spirit.*

Again, Paul emphasizes that this does not happen under our own power. Even the apostle Paul, author of so much of the New Testament, the missionary who took the gospel to the Gentile world, even he was only able to do so by God's grace. He was only able to do so by the Holy Spirit.

It's so easy to be overwhelmed at times by the task; we are called to reach the world. To be God's representative to those around us.

*When I was young, my mom got me a book called "What to Do When Your Mom or Dad Says... 'Clean Your Room!'"* I love to read so much that I actually read it. It apparently made quite the impact because I still think about it from time to time. What I think I liked about it most was that it created small victories; it told the reader to pile everything on the bed, start in one corner of the room, and then clean. It meant the

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<sup>4</sup> Timothy Keller, *Romans 8 - 16 For You* (Eastbourne, UK: The Good Book Company, 2015), Kindle location 2309.

room felt clean right away, which makes me feel a sense of progress. It also made it less overwhelming to put away everything that had gotten dumped on the bed.

What's the connection? You are a special messenger from Christ Jesus to the world. But instead of thinking about the entire room – I mean world – **start in your corner** and clean there. Who are the two or three people that you know that you wish were believers? Begin praying for them daily. Ask God to work in their hearts, ask God to give you wisdom, ask God to give you an opportunity to share with them what you believe. Easter is coming up; it's an incredible time to ask people to come with you to hear the message because there is still a cultural value to go to church on Easter. But do you want to hear a surprising statistic? 82% of the unchurched say they are at least "somewhat likely" to attend church at any point if they are invited by a friend.<sup>5</sup>

***<sup>17</sup> So I have reason to be enthusiastic about all Christ Jesus has done through me in my service to God. <sup>18</sup> Yet I dare not boast about anything except what Christ has done through me, bringing the Gentiles to God by my message and by the way I worked among them. <sup>19</sup> They were convinced by the power of miraculous signs and wonders and by the power of God's Spirit.***

Again, it's the Holy Spirit doing the work in the someone's heart, not us. But we get to be there for it, we get to be a part of how God accomplishes His mission. Is there nothing greater to be enthusiastic about? It is an incredible gift to be present and witness God's transforming work happening in someone's heart and life.

***In this way, I have fully presented the Good News of Christ from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum. <sup>20</sup> My ambition has always been to preach the Good News where the name of Christ has never been heard, rather than where a church has already been started by someone else.***

**I am a messenger. My ambition has always been to preach the Good News.**

I love Paul's language in this passage. This is a man who understands what is most important. God's mission to restore creation to Himself, to see His children brought back to Him. And we are called to that same mission. To see the world around us with God's eyes and live with purpose.

C.S. Lewis once said in a sermon,

***"There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a***

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<sup>5</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *The Unchurched Next Door: Understanding Faith Stages as Keys to Sharing Your Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), Kindle location 295.

*gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.”<sup>6</sup>*

We are surrounded by immortals that God wants restored to Him. That is far more important than the mortal things we distract ourselves with.

Church, it's simple. Pursue unity. Live with purpose. Start in your corner.

This is what we are called to. This is what it means to be a Christian, to be a Christ follower. Let's go!

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<sup>6</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (HarperCollins e-books, 2009), 46.