

Romans: Verse-by-Verse

Romans 15:5-6

In the preceding verses, Paul has given us three reasons not to put a snare or stumbling block in front of our “weaker” brothers and sisters. He followed that by emphasizing that anything that did not stem from a clear conscience was, for that person, “sin”.

It's interesting that Paul now finalizes this long passage on the “stronger” and “weaker” members of Christ's community by referencing Old Testament Scriptures about the place of Gentiles in Christ's Kingdom.

Paul is bringing this discussion to a clear conclusion. He wants both Jewish and Gentile counterparts to see a higher purpose for working out the issues of Mosaic dietary laws, Jewish sabbaths and festivals, and the debate on drinking wine.

He does not, however, leave the model for this up to us. Instead, once again, he points us to Christ and His example. He serves as our model for this higher purpose Paul encourages us to adopt.

Look at verses 5-6:

“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, 6 so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Three things that immediately emerge from those verses: Endurance, Encouragement, and Unity.

Some have taken Paul's words as a hope-filled wish. Some see it as a benediction. Still others see it as a prayer. I think it's all three, but there

is something we cannot miss: What Paul has been encouraging the “strong” and the “weak” to do is not inherent in their human nature.

That’s the larger point. Paul calls God the “God who gives endurance and encouragement”. That’s a great description, isn’t it? God gives endurance and encouragement.

The Greek word for endurance is “hupomone”. It literally means to be under something and remain standing. As one scholar defines it,

“Hupomone speaks of patience in respect to things or circumstances. It describes the ability to abide under or bear up under a “load” with a courageous attitude in the face of the real suffering experienced.”

Let me show you a cross-reference to this word “hupomone” that we translate as “endurance”. It’s found in Hebrews 12:2, where the writer says of Jesus, “Who for the joy set before Him endured Cross despising the shame”. – Hebrews 12:2. The verb “endured” is from that same word, “hupomone”.

Why is Paul connecting “endurance” to his prayer or hope-filled wish for a “spirit” of unity? Here’s why: The situations he has been describing are not going to require a short burst of patience. These are “matters of conscience” – and will not be resolved easily.

Clearly, this kind of patient endurance is not written into our DNA. We will have to get it from God. Again, these kinds of issues will not just fade away.

Let me say this: We think that issues of choice ought to be dealt with quickly, so we can move on. Was that a realistic expectation for the 1st-century Church?

Jewish and Gentile Christians were meeting together for worship and fellowship. They had vastly different backgrounds. They had various views on dietary and sabbath rules. Was that going to be resolved quickly?

The same is true for the 21st-century Church. Every believing community is made up of people with different personalities, backgrounds, social status, and scriptural knowledge. There are bound to be differences of opinion.

Can we realistically expect everyone to quickly deal with their differences and move on to bigger things?

So, Paul breathes a prayer, a hope-filled wish, and a benediction. He says, "May God give you endurance." But then he adds something else. He also calls God the "God of Encouragement".

I feel blessed when I read that description. The God I serve is the "God of Encouragement". **He is, isn't he?**

- He said to Abraham, "Don't be afraid. I am your shield. Your reward will be very great." – Genesis 15:1
- He said to Jacob, "Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you." - Genesis 31:3
- He said to Moses, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain." Exodus 3:12
- He said to Joshua, "No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you." - Joshua 1:5

Paul wants his Jewish and Gentile-Christians friends to know that God will be the God who provides endurance and encouragement. They are going to need both as they work through the day-to-day issues of being the "stronger" and "weaker" members of the local churches.

Annie Flint's poem expresses it this way:

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,

*When our strength has failed 'ere the day is half done;
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources
Our Father's full giving is only begun."* – Annie Flint

Let me read verses 5-6 again, noting the rest of Paul's statement:

"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Let me show you something interesting. If I edit out Paul's words about God giving us endurance and encouragement", this is what we see:

"May God give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The source of unity must be God. It cannot be rules, regulations, or policies. All of those may be necessary for the functioning of the local church, but they will never fully unify a church. The source of unity must be God.

Having said that, let me show you something else here. Notice Paul talks about a "spirit of unity among yourselves." Another way of translating the original Greek sentence is this: "May God give you to think the same thing among yourselves".

Does Paul believe these Roman Christians will simply agree with each other on these "issues of conscience"? Evidently not. I say that because he has spent nearly two chapters telling the strong to support the weak and the weak to not despise the "strong".

He's told both groups to accept each other despite their disagreements on "matters of conscience". So what does Paul expect to happen? I think that becomes clear when we see the latter part of

his statement in verse 5: “May God give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus...”

The literal Greek wording here is, “according to Jesus Christ.” Paul is pointing to a unity that supersedes their individual preferences and liberties. It is a unity that is rooted in Christ, not preferences.

Let me put it this way: The more we focus on Christ, the less “issues of conscience” occupy our thoughts. If we allow Christ to be our primary focus – what we believe about Him – the more we will agree with one another.

The real problem in most situations is that we have taken our focus from Christ and zeroed in on issues that do not have eternal value. Consider this:

- In eternity, will how often we received communion matter?
- In eternity, will what instruments we used in worship matter?
- In eternity, will what we wore to church services matter?
- In eternity, will whether we sang hymns or choruses matter?

Let's dig a little deeper. When we get to heaven and find billions of people there, will we start having these discussions all over again? Will we be debating dietary laws? Will we hold conferences on Sabbath keeping? Will there be different lunchrooms for carnivores and vegetarians?

I don't see any of that happening. What I do see is billions of people who are focused on the Trinity. What I do see is what I read in the book of Revelation:

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God,

who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." - Revelation 7:9-10

That is what Paul points to at the end of verse 5. What is the purpose of this unity based on focusing on Christ? "...So that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

We've seen three things in verses 5-6: Endurance, Encouragement, and Unity.

These issues of conscience will not be quickly resolved, but it is our focus that makes the difference. God will give us endurance and encouragement as the "stronger" seek to support the "weaker".

In the end, our common focus on Christ will help us mitigate the potential schisms brought about by "issues of conscience".