

## Romans: Verse-by-Verse

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### Romans 15:1-4

#### Study Notes

As we finished last time, we saw Paul's statement, "Everything that does not come from faith is sin."

When we do what we believe or know to be wrong, for us it is sin. It violates our conscience and makes us feel we have done something God does not approve of.

Paul is trying to strike a balance between the strong and the weak regarding their consciences about what is and isn't acceptable. Two things are necessary in these situations: 1. The stronger must respect the weaker. 2. The weaker may need to consider the need to re-educate themselves about what the Bible really requires of them.

Romans 15:1-4:

"We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. 2 Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. 3 For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." 4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

- **The Strong and the Weak:**

In Romans 14:13-23, Paul urged the strong to not despise or judge the weaker brother. He went on to warn against distressing or ruining the weaker brother's faith. In this next section Paul is going to tell the "strong" not to focus only on what is good for them.

Three times in three verses, Paul will use the word “please”, referring to the “strong”, the “weak”, and to Christ. This should indicate that Paul is emphasizing something important.

Look at verses 1-2 again:

“We who are strong 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.”

While Paul has hinted before that he belongs to the group that he describes as the “strong”, he now says it plainly. He says, “We who are strong ... should bear with the failings of the weak”.

Paul is clearly identifying himself as one of the “strong”: He’s one of those Christians who has no qualms of conscience about eating meat that has been slaughtered and offered to an idol – before being sold at the open market.

- **Bearing With The Failings Of The Weak:**

Having identified himself as one of the “strong” Paul gives some straightforward directions. First, he says the “strong” should “bear with the failings of the weak”.

The word “failings” is better translated as “weaknesses”. This is important because Paul is not identifying the “weak” as failures. They have consciences that do not readily allow them to eat meats that have been offered to idols.

Paul says the “strong” should not be concerned only about themselves, but about those who do not share their freedoms. Human nature would probably dictate that the “strong” would dismiss the consciences of the “weak” as ridiculous or unnecessary.

In Romans 14:20 we heard the slogan that was used by the “strong” in

this debate: "All food is clean!" The "weak" could not say that, so what should be done? Paul says, "Bear with their weaknesses."

In the Greek the word here for "bear" means to "endure", "tolerate", "carry", or "support". Depending on the situation, the stronger brother or sister might be required to do more than one of these things at the same time.

- **"We Should Not Please Ourselves":**

Next, Paul says, "we should not please ourselves". That's really what it means to "bear the weaknesses" of others. If we put ourselves first, we only pursue what is good for us. If we put others first, we must do the opposite.

It's the difference between using our strengths for our own happiness or choosing to support our brothers and sisters to their advantage.

- **Pleasing Our Neighbor For Their Good:**

Paul compounds his last statement in verse 2. He writes, "Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up."

Now we have both halves of the story. We are not to do what pleases us: we are to do what pleases our neighbor.

**First**, we are to put our weaker brothers and sisters first for their good. Notice Paul uses the word "neighbor" to describe the person with the weaker conscience. Up to this point, he has mostly used the word "brother". Now he reverts to word "neighbor". I think he is pointing back to what he said in Romans 13:9-10:

"The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," ... are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."

**Second**, we are to put our weaker brothers and sisters first in order to build them up in Christ. Putting them first is the opposite of every other tendency Paul has mentioned in this long passage. The fleshly tendencies would be to:

- Cause them to stumble: 14:13, 20, 21
- Tear them down: 14:20
- Damage them: 14:15

- **“For Even Christ Did Not Please Himself”:**

Having said all this, Paul makes a third statement about pleasing ourselves. He illustrates this in the life of Jesus. Paul writes, “For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.”

The format of that statement should be familiar to us. Paul is arguing from the stronger to the weaker. The hint is in the word “even”. He says, “Even Christ did not please himself.”

That phrase mirrors Philippians 2:6-7: “Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being.” – New Living Translation

Christ had every right to put himself first. He was, after all, the Second Person of the Godhead. He was sinless, perfect, all-powerful, and the instrument of God’s creation. It would have been perfectly appropriate for Jesus to put his divine rights before ours.

It’s interesting that Paul did not refer specifically to Christ’s Incarnation. Instead, he quotes Psalm 69, which is about the injustices experienced by a righteous man. Verses 7-9 say”

“For I endure scorn for your sake, and shame covers my face. I am a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my own mother’s sons; for zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.”

While Psalm 69 is quoted many times in the New Testament as a Messianic psalm, Paul uses it as an encouragement for the “strong” not to put themselves first.

How is that verse related to Paul’s argument? In the original psalm, the writer says, “The insults of those who insult you fall on me.” He’s saying that because he aligned himself with God, the insults others meant for God fell on him. Because he did not put himself first, he had to put up with the insults of others.

This is a great example of Paul using Old Testament snippets to support his statements. As Paul sees it, putting God’s kingdom first may well mean that we will have to bear the insults of others.

Was Paul thinking about the reactions of the rest of the “stronger brothers” when a believer put their needs for support first, instead of pleasing themselves? I think that is a reasonable thought.

Paul is once again saying, “Here’s an example from Jesus’ life. He could have legitimately put himself first, but he didn’t. It’s not a matter of rights: It’s a matter of loving others.” If Christ fulfilled Psalm 69, we ought to.

- **The Relevance Of Scriptures:**

As we come to verse 4, we find Paul diverts from his subject briefly, to say something about the relevance of Scripture to our lives. He writes, “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

There is both an immediate and long-term application to Paul’s statement here. The immediate application is that Psalm 69 speaks to putting God and others first, regardless of our own goals.

Note the word “endurance” in Paul’s statement. Putting the “weaker” neighbor first in “matters of dispute” may well involve

“endurance”. These kinds of issues will not be resolved quickly; it may take time for the “weaker” neighbor to come to grips with a greater sense of grace than they currently enjoy.

Look at verse four once more: “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

John Stott summarizes the importance of the “encouragement of the Scriptures”:

**1. Its Contemporary Intention:** The books of Scripture were of course primarily intended for those to and for whom they were *written in the past*. Yet the apostle is persuaded that they were also *written to teach us*.

**2. Its Inclusive Value:** “Paul declares that *everything* written in the past is for us, although obviously not everything is of equal value. Jesus himself spoke of ‘the more important matters of the law’”.

**3. Its Christological Focus:** “Paul’s application of Psalm 69 to Christ is a fine example of how the risen Lord could explain to his disciples ‘what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself’”.

**4. Its Practical Purpose:** “[The Scriptures] ... can bring us *encouragement* with a view to *endurance*, so that we *might have hope*, looking beyond time to eternity, beyond present sufferings to future glory.”

**5. Its Divine Message:** “The striking fact that ‘endurance and encouragement’, are attributed to God [in verse 5], can only mean that it is God himself ... continues to speak through what he has spoken.