

April 13/14, 2013

## The Gospel Story: Glorify God

Romans 15:1-13

Pastor Bryan Clark

I'm sure most of you are familiar with seeing the initials *WWJD*—*What Would Jesus Do?* But here's another way to think about it. What if the initials were *WDJD*—*What Did Jesus Do?* When you read through the New Testament, the question is not really, "What *would* Jesus do?" The question is, "What *did* Jesus do?" And the answer is: He sacrificed Himself that you might have life. Jesus is then put forth as the model for how we are to live our lives. If that's what He did for us, then that's what we should do for Him.

Now I understand that's asking a lot. But when you begin to think about the possibilities of what could be if we, as the people of God, live that way, it's very compelling. What if we, together as the people of God, we together as God's family, as the church of Jesus Christ, actually created an environment where legalism was neutralized, we just said, "We're not going to live that way; we're not going to pursue God that way," where weakness is respected and shared, where we said, "Hey, I know you're struggling and we're in this together, and I'm going to help you carry your load, and we're gonna get there together," and where freedom was celebrated as the ultimate expression of what it means to be *in Christ*? I suggest to you that an environment like that would be so compelling it would be irresistible to people!

That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have your Bible, turn with me to the book of Romans, Chapter 15. Romans 15 picks up and maybe summarizes the conversation from last week—from chapter 14—so it would be helpful just to go back and review a little bit, redefine some terms, and kind of get our minds engaged in last week's discussion. It's very important to rightly understand these passages, to remember we're not talking about black and white sin issues. We're not talking about things that the Bible clearly says are sin—things like greed and adultery and stealing. We're talking about what's commonly referred to as *gray areas*. We're not talking about confusion around the message of the gospel—what does it take to be saved? We are talking about, as Christians, what is and is not permissible in areas where the Bible isn't that clear, and understanding that we may have differences because of our backgrounds, because of our experiences. The Holy Spirit may actually convict us differently and how do we manage that?

We're also not talking about a text that the legalists can use to control everyone's behavior. Historically there have always been legalists that want to use passages like this to say whatever offends them. It means that everybody has to change their behavior in order to fit *them*. That's not the point of the text. We don't have to live our Christian lives to please the legalists. It's also not talking about just a difference of opinion. We may have a difference of opinion in terms of what's allowed in our freedom. That's fine. But what the text is talking about is what is *legitimately* an area of weakness, an area where somebody has not yet found freedom in Christ. It's an area of weakness; it's an area of vulnerability. It's an area where I could give in to temptation and violate my conscience and actually start down a destructive path. That's specifically what the text is talking about. So how do we manage that among us?

Paul gave us two helpful questions in chapter 14 to manage how we're making our decisions. The one question would be: Is this behavior well pleasing to God? Remember, when Paul wrote to the Corinthians in a very similar discussion as Romans, he said, "Everything is permissible, but not

everything is profitable.” In other words, just because we have the freedom to do lots of things doesn’t mean those are the best things to be doing—so it’s a very helpful question. Am I doing this just because I’m free to do it, or am I doing this because I think it’s well-pleasing to God?

The second question was: God, is this something I can give thanks for? In other words, if I’m so convinced this is well-pleasing to God, it’s something that flows out of a heart of thanksgiving. “*God, I thank You that You’ve given me this because I think it’s pleasing to You.*” It’s the same two questions if you’re struggling in an area of weakness and you have certain convictions. It’s a good question to ask: *Do I have this conviction because I feel like this is the conviction of the Holy Spirit? Is this well-pleasing to God?* That helps sort out: is that really what it is, or is it some form of legalism? Is this some form of self-righteousness, or is this just caving in to some sort of peer pressure around me? Also, is this something I can give thanks for? “*God, I thank you for this conviction and the strength to follow it because I think this pleases You.*” So here are two very practical questions to help us sort out these issues. With all of that in mind, then we pick it up in chapter 15, verse 1:

**Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not *just* please ourselves.** (\*NASB, Romans 15:1)

Now in chapter 14 Paul talked about the *weak*, which would imply there are those who are *strong*, but he didn’t use that label until chapter 15. Now he actually says it. There are those **who are strong**, those who experience freedom in Christ, and they are there to help the weak. Paul also identifies himself among the strong. **We who are strong**...are to do what? We are to **bear the weaknesses of those who are without strength**. That word **bear** is an interesting word. It means *to share the load*. It’s the word Paul uses when he writes to the Galatians and he says, “Bear one another’s burdens.” It’s not just that I feel some sort of sympathy or empathy. “*Oh, that’s too bad...*” But rather it’s that I roll up my sleeves and I say, “*Hey, I know right now you’re struggling with this and this is really hard, and I want you to know I’m willing to give up my freedom, roll up my sleeves and help you carry this load because I’m committed to making sure we get to the finish line together.*” It’s actually getting involved and helping carry the load.

He says, “...**those without strength and not *just* please ourselves.**” The word ***just*** there should be in italics in your Bible, which tells you it isn’t actually in the Greek text. The Greek text is a little stronger: “*And not please ourselves.*” There is this reality that the culture around us lives to please itself. People are selfish; people are self-focused. Even within religious circles, self-righteousness is heavy on the *self*. Legalism is dominated by self-focus. That’s the way the system works. But even people that are struggling with weakness are fairly self-oriented. That’s the whole point: *I’m always thinking about my weakness and my struggle*. But it’s those who are strong. It’s those who have been set free, who are free not to do as I please, not to be selfish, but actually to give myself away, to serve others, to think about somebody else, and to actually roll up my sleeves and help somebody carry their load.

Over the years I’ve made comments about my friends that are in the recovery movement. One of the things that strikes me is the steps that those people take are basically just biblical principles. That’s basically why they work. And there’s an understanding in the DNA of that movement that those who have been helped, those who, in their hour of weakness, had somebody that reached out to them and helped them be free of whatever it is, that there’s a sense in which I have an obligation to do the same for somebody else. It’s not something that’s a suggestion. It’s not something that *maybe* you do. It’s actually an obligation. It’s in the DNA. It’s the way they think. It’s the way

they live their lives. It's not something they turn on an hour or two a week. It's just how they live. There is this overwhelming sense that, "In my hour of need, when I was going down the tank, somebody reached out; somebody cared; somebody helped me find freedom," and it's their obligation to turn around and help somebody else. As a matter of fact, I would say over the years I have not known of any other category of people that are more willing to drop everything they're doing at a moment's notice and help somebody in their hour of need than my friends in the recovery movement. It's a biblical principle that when we have been set free, when we have found freedom in Christ, we don't expend our freedom on ourselves; but rather we understand that it's our obligation, the text says, to reach out to those who are struggling in their hour of weakness and say, "Hey, I'm willing to give up some freedoms to come alongside of you and to love you and help carry the load, and we're gonna get through this together." It's a very powerful commitment we have as Christians. Verse 2:

**Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.**

That connects us back to chapter 13: the fulfillment of the law is "to love your neighbor as yourself," and of course it starts with the people of God loving one another. Now typically the language is, "Love your neighbor." This is a little unique in that we are **to please our neighbor**. There are times in the New Testament where we are warned *not* to be a *people pleaser*, so it might be helpful to sort that out a little bit. When the Bible refers to a *people pleaser*, it is talking about someone who is more interested in pleasing people than pleasing God. At the end of the day, if push comes to shove, I have to please God over people and make my choices accordingly. It also refers to a people pleaser as someone who flatters somebody else in order to get something from them. In other words, it's still selfishly motivated. I might please someone and flatter someone in order to gain something back. What the text is talking about is the opposite: that I'm willing to die to myself. I'm willing to give myself away in order to please my neighbor. As a matter of fact, that's exactly what the text says. **Each of us is to please his neighbor for His good, for His edification.**

Throughout history there has always been a problem with the strong taking advantage of the weak. No matter what a culture wants to be, at the end of the day, every culture has always been guilty of the strong preying on the weak. It's part of our orientation; it's part of our selfishness. The more secular we become as a nation, the more of a problem this is going to become.

There's a very interesting book; it's called *The Death of Adam* by Marilyn Robinson. It's been around for several years but in the book she has an essay called *Darwinism*. It would be her contention that the reason why Darwinism became so popular so fast had nothing to do with the science. As a matter of fact, the science was not really even understood or known. But rather, in the advent of the *Industrial Revolution*, the world was looking for some basis by which we could convince ourselves that it's good for the strong to prey on the weak, for the strong to take advantage of the weak, that some way, somehow that will make the world better. And that's what they heard in the theory of Darwinism—that it's the strong that survive and, at the end of the day, that makes the world a better place. Now you may agree or disagree with her essay, but I found it very thought-provoking because, throughout the history of the world, this has always been a problem. But there should be one place, one economy, one family where it's radically different, where rather than the strong preying on the weak, there's a commitment to die to myself and to give myself away and to use my freedom to help the weak carry their load, to please my neighbor, to edify and build up my neighbor and not just live my life for myself.

Now maybe at the end of verse 2, we're thinking that's a lot to ask. Okay, fine. Verse 3:

**For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "THE REPROACHES OF THOSE WHO REPROACHED YOU FELL ON ME."**

That's a quote from Psalm 69. The **You** is God the Father, the **Me** is Christ, where Jesus is saying *the reproach of the world against God the Father was actually laid on Christ*. Christ did not come to please Himself; He came to please the Father. He came to make a way of salvation. He came to seek and to save the lost. He came to give up His own life so that we could have forgiveness and eternal life in God. He is the model. Over and over again in the New Testament Jesus is put forth as the model. If it's His life in us, if we're in Christ, if we have the spirit of Christ, if we have the nature of Christ, shouldn't our lives resemble Christ? And the essence of that is to die to ourselves, to sacrifice ourselves, to not just live to please ourselves.

So think of it this way: Everything that we have come to believe and hold near and dear from Romans 1 through 11, everything that provides the basis of our salvation—salvation by grace through faith—everything that has caused us to go from death to life, to go from being an enemy of God to a friend of God, to having the life that our soul has been longing for—*everything* is based on the simple statement, "*Jesus did not come to please Himself.*" If Jesus was as selfish as we tend to be, we would have no hope! The only reason we have hope, the only reason we have salvation is because He was willing to give His life up to pay for our sins. So Paul is putting that forth as the model. Verse 4:

**For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we may have hope.**

Basically what he is saying is this: that this is part of the gospel story that's been unfolding for thousands of years, that this is what the Scriptures have been about for thousands of years. And the story culminates in hope, remembering that hope is not wishful thinking. Hope is something guaranteed, but it's yet future. The story ends with a new heaven and a new earth. The story ends with paradise. The story ends in a place where there's no more pain, no more struggle, no more tears, no more sorrow. It's a place our souls are longing for. It's a place where every longing and desire is perfectly and fully fulfilled. It's everything that my soul longs for today. This isn't just wishful thinking. One day that's the promise, and we're headed toward that, and God has been unfolding this story for thousands of years. But what the text is saying is: we've been invited to be part of the story—not just in receiving salvation as if it's some sort of a ticket to Heaven, but actually participating in the story. We're part of the Abraham story. We're part of the Noah story. We're part of the Moses story. We're part of the David story. We're part of the Elijah story. We're part of the Peter story. We're part of the Paul story. This has been a remarkable God story that's been unfolding for thousands of years, and God has invited us to be part of the story—to have a life of purpose, to have a life of meaning. He says, "I need you to be proclaimers. I need you to proclaim with your words, but I need you to proclaim with your lives. I want people to get a glimpse today of the world to come, and for that to happen, you have to live that way. You have to create a whole new culture, a whole new economy that's based on love, that's based on God's mercy and grace. It's based on a whole new way of life, a whole new way of viewing one another that creates a culture that is so radically different than the culture around you, people will find it irresistible—that they might also come to know the Christ that has set you free." So that's the essence of what he's saying, so that's what encourages us. It challenges us, but it gives us what we need to persevere—that I understand I've been invited into this big story—something bigger than

myself, to give my life to what will matter forever, and therefore I need to do my part in creating such a culture. Verse 5—he offers a prayer:

**Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus;**

In order for this to happen, we have to be of one mind. It's not my mind; it's not your mind. It's the mind of Christ. We maybe would say we all have to be on the same page and understand: to get there we can't be selfish; we can't be self-oriented. We have to be oriented around giving ourselves away, following the model of Jesus. This is the essence of the mission.

This is why disunity in a church is such serious business. It goes to the heart of the mission. Churches that struggle with disunity don't need to have lots of meetings or have lots of discussions to see how we can get along. They need to re-up their sense of mission, because it's a strong sense of mission that causes us to lay aside our personal preferences and to lay aside our differences and say that we want to be a part of something bigger than ourselves, something that matters forever, something that I'm willing to give myself away to—and that's what he's talking about. Verse 6:

**... so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

The phrase **one accord** is actually a political term. It means *from the heart*. There's a sense of unity; there's a sense of commitment; there's a sense that we're in this together. Now as soon as I say that's a *political* term, it's hard to imagine that in our culture, and I think probably in most cultures. The last time it kind of rings in my own mind is right after 9/11 when the nation's leaders gathered on the steps of the capitol and together they sang, "God Bless America." There was a moment there when it felt like it doesn't matter if you're a Democrat or a Republican, a conservative or a liberal. There was a sense in which, "We're in this together." I'm not sure I've felt that since then. But that's what the word means—that we would be united at our hearts and say, "Hey, we're in this together for the greater good of God's story." One voice, then, is the external proclamation of that, or the external evidence of that. We're united with one mind. We're united in our hearts, which gives evidence externally in the way that we live our lives, and all of it with one voice to glorify God. At the end of the day, it is to reflect God's glory. It is to celebrate God and the God story and what He's done.

One of the things that I find interesting is how many church mission statements don't mention God. I'm not quite sure what the deal is with that. At the end of the day, the purpose is to bring God glory. We take very seriously that our mission statement starts with: "**To Glorify God...here's what we're doing...to glorify God by seeking to present every person complete in Christ.**" At the end of the day, it's about God. It's about God's glory. It's about the God story and what He was willing to do to make it possible. But it's also more than that. If you understand from eternity past, God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit dwelt in relationship with one another—glorifying one another, celebrating one another, delighting in one another, loving one another. That is the essence of eternal life—that's what it means. This is life. This is the fullest, richest life possible! The essence of salvation is that God has invited us into that life, but the essence of that life is not selfishness. It's to give yourself away. It's to love; it's to delight in; it's to celebrate somebody else. And so in glorifying God, we actually find the life that our souls are longing for. We begin to experience the reality of eternal life, which isn't just a duration of life; it's a quality of life. So it's all of that in that statement. Verse 7:

**Therefore, accept one another, (how?) just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.**

I mentioned last week that people often refer to the Golden Rule, but the Golden Rule still has a selfish orientation: *Do unto others...why?...because that's how I want to be treated.* The biblical call would be higher than that—that we treat one another as God treats them; we love one another as God loves them; we accept one another as God accepts them. We see people through the eyes of God. We treat people, understanding how God sees them and has changed them.

Can you imagine an environment where we were very diligent to remember: for every Christian, something miraculous is going on inside of you? You are actually being made into a new creation. Something has radically changed. You've been changed from the inside out. You have the nature of Christ. You have the very presence of Christ dwelling in you. You're actually a miracle! You're becoming a trophy of God's grace. You may or may not feel it today, but what's happening to you is magnificent! If we would see one another the way God sees us, and understand that if you trusted Christ as Savior, you've been clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Nobody is *more than*; nobody is *less than*; we are all in this together. He told us in chapter 12 that we should actually compete with one another to honor one another, to celebrate what God is doing in our lives. What if we created an environment where there was more celebrating and less fixing...less criticizing...less judging? What if we could see one another the way God sees us and accept one another the way God accepts us? If God sees you and delights in you and celebrates you and dances over you, can't I see you that way?

So think of it this way: Imagine when you get together with your Christian friends, what would you prefer? Would you prefer to be celebrated, delighted in, or fixed? Every time you get together with someone, they're fixing you. They're telling you what's wrong with you. They're reminding you why you don't measure up. Is that really what you would prefer? Or would you prefer someone who just delights in you, who celebrates you, who loves you, who can see you and accept you through the eyes of God and what Christ has done in you? And if that's what you would prefer, then that's how you should treat others—that we would accept one another as God has accepted us.

**For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises *given* to the fathers, and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written,**

**“THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO YOU AMONG THE GENTILES,  
AND I WILL SING TO YOUR NAME.”**

**Again he says,**

**“REJOICE, O GENTILES, WITH HIS PEOPLE.”**

**And again,**

**“PRAISE THE LORD ALL YOU GENTILES,  
AND LET ALL THE PEOPLES PRAISE HIM.”**

**Again Isaiah says,**

**“THERE SHALL COME THE ROOT OF JESSE,  
AND HE WHO ARISES TO RULE OVER THE GENTILES,  
IN HIM SHALL THE GENTILES HOPE.” (Vs. 8-12)**

Basically, what he is saying is that this Jewish-Gentile conflict goes right to the heart of the God story, that the God story has always been about bringing together the Jews and the Gentiles in the name of God. So he reminds them that Jesus was the fulfillment, the Messiah, the fulfillment of the

promise made to the fathers—in other words, a promise made to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob, and on down the line—that the Messiah would come through you. The Messiah would be Jewish, but the promise has always been that the Gentiles would be included among the people of God. So he quotes from Deuteronomy; he quotes from the Psalms; he quotes from the prophets. It's a technique that says the whole of the Old Testament—in the law, in the writings, in the prophets—told the same story: that Gentiles will be included for God's glory. So what he's saying is that, at the end of the day, the story was about people coming together in the name of Jesus to be one people. So the fact that the Jews and the Gentiles couldn't get along in the Roman church was going right to the heart of the story.

Now in our current culture we don't struggle so much with Jews and Gentiles getting along in churches, but the application would be that God has created a place where all people are welcome; all people are accepted; all people equally belong. I know people like to think of the United States as a melting pot, but the fact is that we still live in a country full of prejudice, full of hatred, full of conflict, because there's no way ultimately to change that without the power of Jesus to change something deep in our nature—to create an environment of grace. Grace is the only thing that ultimately changes that. It's on the basis of grace that we can say, "It doesn't matter if you're old or young. It doesn't matter if you're black or white or Asian. It doesn't matter if you're male or female. It doesn't matter where you've been. It doesn't matter what you've done. It doesn't matter what's been done to you. It doesn't matter what your story is. *Everyone* is equally accepted under God's umbrella of grace no matter who you are, rich or poor, no matter how messed up you were. Every single one of us comes to God through the same door of God's grace. We have to come through Jesus. We were all equally needy; we were all equally desperate—and we all come equally as sinners and misfits and losers who have been made right through the power of Jesus. Therefore, on the basis of grace, everyone is celebrated; everyone is delighted in; everybody is welcome. It's the one culture that can actually produce what the world longs for—a place where everyone is loved; everyone is accepted; everyone is celebrated. What a place that would be! He ends with the benediction, verse 13:

**Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace...**

So the God that's made this vision—this future reality—we get to experience at least a part of that now. He wants us to experience the joy of peace in that. What makes that possible? He says:

**...in believing (you have to believe it!), so that you will abound in hope (how?) by the power of the Holy Spirit.**

This is a theme I believe I've been very consistent with throughout the book of Romans, and that is we must *believe* the truth. We've said all the way along this isn't just something you go out and do. This isn't just something where you have to try harder. You have to go back to the core theology of Romans and say, "Do I believe this? And do I believe it to such a degree it changes the way I live; it changes the way I look at other people; it changes the course of my life? Remembering that we've been empowered by the very Spirit of God, we don't lack anything that we need to live this way. We just have to believe it and believe in the power of the Spirit to give us what we need to make it possible.

Just imagine if we had one mind, one heart, one voice, willing to die to ourselves, to give ourselves away, to give people a glimpse of the world to come as our part of the gospel story. Just imagine if we created a place, a culture where legalism was neutralized—we just said we're not going to live

that way; that's not how we're going to pursue God—where weakness is respected and it's shared, and we say to one another, "*Hey, I'll give up my freedom; I'll roll up my sleeves; I'll come alongside you; I'll help carry the load! We're gonna get through this together. I want you to know this is a place that's safe for you!*"—and where freedom is celebrated as the ultimate expression of what it means to be in Christ. I suggest to you that such a place would be so compelling, people would find it irresistible! May it be so!

*Father, we're thankful that You love us. We're thankful that You sent Jesus who gave up His life for us. Lord, everything we have that matters we have because Jesus didn't come to please Himself. God, You've called us to be like Jesus, to represent Jesus on earth as His body. Lord, may we live as You've called us to live, to give people a glimpse of the world to come, that others might come to know the Savior who has changed our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

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## **The Gospel Story: Glorify God**

*A Study of Romans*

Romans 15:1-13

Pastor Bryan Clark

### **Opening Discussion**

1. Define and discuss the following terms:
  - a. Legalism
  - b. Grey areas
  - c. Weak Christians
  - d. Christian liberty
  
2. Practically speaking how do you assess if someone is objecting to certain liberties because he/she is being legalistic or because this is a legitimate area of weakness? How would your responses differ accordingly?
  
3. What is the difference between unity and uniformity?
  
4. What would it take for a church family to be a place where:
  - a. Legalism is neutralized?
  - b. Weakness is respected and shared?
  - c. Liberty is celebrated?

### **Bible Study**

1. Review the main points from Romans 14:1-23. What are the two helpful questions we might ask to sort out our own motives for behaviors?
  
2. What is the difference between a discipleship model focused on getting Christians to obey the rules verses a model that learns to hear and obey the voice of the Spirit in us? (for those who have young children, how might this effect our parenting model?)
  
3. Read Romans 15:1-6. What is the obligation of the strong towards the weak? What does it mean to “bear” the weaknesses of those without strength? (same word in Gal. 6:2)
  
4. Compare 15:1b-2 with Romans 12:3,10 and Philippians 2:3. What do you think this means in very practical every day terms?

5. Paul presents Christ as the model for this behavior. How do the words “Christ did not please Himself” define chapters 1-11 of Romans? What would we have if Christ was as selfish as most of us tend to be?
6. Why is unity so important according to this text? What is at stake?
7. Read Romans 15:7-13. Paul says we are to accept one another as Christ has accepted us. How has Christ accepted us? How should this effect the way we view one another as Christians? Would you prefer other Christians evaluate and try to fix you all the time or have them celebrate you because you are radically changed in Christ?
8. Paul quotes from the Law, the Prophets and the Writings to remind us that the Gospel story has always been about bringing together Jews and Gentiles to be one in Christ. What are the implications for us today in the church? What should be the ultimate “melting pot” in the world today?

## **Application**

1. Summarize Romans 14:1-15:13. What do you think are the top 3 points Paul was making?
2. What was your biggest “aha” moment in this text or what did you most need to be reminded of?
3. Start with your small group. What can you do to:
  - a. Neutralize legalism?
  - b. Respect and share in one another’s weaknesses?
  - c. Celebrate liberty?