

BOB HALLMAN - THE EPIC LIFE

The Characteristics Of The Strong

Romans 15:1-13

2000

Introduction

In the past several weeks we have been discussing disputable matters – those issues that are neither prohibited nor commanded in scripture.

With Paul's help we concluded that,

In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.

Or in the language of our day: *Major in the majors and minor in the minors.*

In other words, we need to keep the main thing, the main thing. And the main thing is *Jesus!*

In the closing hours of His life, Jesus prayed four times for the unity of the church (Jn 17:11, 21, 22, 23) -- a remarkable fact considering the limitless number of things that Jesus could have prayed for.

This emphasis in Jesus' prayer speaks volumes about the importance that God places on unity within the church. In light of this, I find it amazing how quickly we get sidetracked from the "main thing" and allow disputable issues to break our fellowship with other believers and destroy the witness of the church.

Illustration:

This past week I met a man who has spent most of his life as an alcoholic. He has lost everything. His life savings, his family, his self-respect. I wondered what it was that might have influenced him to live such a self-destructive life – and then he told me. He grew up in a small town where everyone went to church. But the Episcopalians were at war with the Baptists and the Baptists were at war with the Pentecostals, and the Pentecostals were at war with the Catholics. Evidently, it was just about the only thing people talked about at church. And according to him, disunity and a lack of love was the major reason he left the church and rejected the message of the gospel. As I looked at him, I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if the church had fulfilled Jesus' fervent prayer for unity.

The problem of disunity is not new to the church. It was a problem in first century church at Rome as well. Some theologians believe that the disunity and rivalry was so bitter between the Jewish and Gentile believers that some of the brothers actually turned in the names of their fellow believers, naming them as traitors against the Empire. Their envy, jealousy and disunity resulted in believers being fed to the lions in the Coliseum.

I The Strong Are Characterized by Love

A. They **bear** with the failings of the weak [Verse 1a]

As we noted last week, the weaker brother is the one who has a tendency toward legalism. This person is usually quite disciplined in his spiritual life, surrounds himself with all kinds of rules and regulations, and has strong convictions about disputable matters that are neither forbidden nor commanded in the Bible.

The strong, on the other hand, are those who have a broader, more Biblical understanding of their freedom in Christ. And though both the strong and the weak are responsible for their contribution toward unity within the body of Christ, Paul states that the greater burden rests the strong.

Ought to = Opheilo = “To owe a debt or have a strong obligation”

A reminder of Paul’s words in Romans 13:8 “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.”

Bear = Bastazo = “To lift or carry”

Failings = Asthenema = “A scruple of conscience or infirmity”

I like J. B. Phillips' translation of this verse:

“We who have strong faith ought to shoulder the burden of the doubts and qualms of others, and not just to go our own sweet way.”

So as believers we are not simply to tolerate one another’s weaknesses but we are actually to help carry the load – by not being critical or condescending but by showing respect for sincere differences of opinion over disputable matters.

Gal 6:2 “Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

B. They do not live to **please** themselves [Verse 1b]

The right use of our Christian freedoms often require sacrifice and self-denial -- especially when exercising these freedoms would harm a weaker brother or sister.

1. They seek to please their **neighbor** [Verse 2a]

Now, Paul is not encouraging us to be people-pleasers – who for the sake of peace, acceptance and popularity do and say whatever they think others will approve of.

Gal 1:10 “If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.”

Philippians 2:2-4 “... [be] like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

2. They seek to do their neighbor good [Verse 2b]

1 Corinthians 10:24 “Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.”

The objective of pleasing my neighbor is to promote his good, even if it requires the sacrifice of some my own freedoms and pleasure, which it often does.

3. They seek to **build up** their neighbor [Verse 2c]

Build up = Oikodome = Used of architecture = “To construct”

Romans 14:19 “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.”

Application:

As believers, we should be known for our consistent pattern of lifting others up – by our conversation, by our attitudes and by our deeds. Is that the mark of your life? If you are truly a follower of Jesus, it will be!

- C. They **follow** the modeling of Christ [Verse 3]

God’s plan for our lives is clear – He wants us to be just like His Son.

Romans 8:29 “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”

1. Jesus did not come to please Himself

Christ did not demand his rights; Instead, He put the interests of other before his own.

Philippians 2:5-8 “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death -- even death on a cross!”

If Jesus wanted to live to please Himself, He never would have left the Father’s side and the glory He shared with Him to live among sinful mankind. And He certainly would not have surrendered His rights as God to become a servant of the world by yielding His body as a sacrifice for sin (Mark 10:45).

2. Jesus endured insults for our benefit

2 Corinthians 8:9 “... though [Jesus] was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”

In spite of the fact that Jesus never sinned and only did the will of His Father (Jn 4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 8:28-29) He was nevertheless repeatedly criticized by the religious leaders of His day. They found fault with His views on the Sabbath, with His perspectives on the Law, with His untimely healings of the sick and crippled, with His claims to be the Son of God, and with His unseemly habit of befriending sinners.

On one occasion Jesus said to these religious leaders, "When John came neither eating nor drinking, you said of him, 'He has a demon.' But when I came both eating and drinking, you called me a glutton and a drunkard. So how can I please you?" (Matt 11:18-19, Luke 7:33-34)

Application:

There will be times that, no matter how hard you try, you will fail to please everyone. Just be sure that you aren't the cause of the disunity!

D. They are instructed by the **Word** of God [Verse 4]

2 Timothy 3:16-17 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

1. The Word **teaches** us [Verse 4a]

Teaching = Didaskalia = "Instruction or learning"

1 Corinthians 10:6, 11 "Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. ... These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us ..."

2. The Word gives us endurance [Verse 4b]

Endurance = Hupomone = "Cheerful perseverance"

Why endurance? Because often times as we work through conflicts that result from disagreements over disputable matters, we need to exercise patience for things to be finally worked out.

Col 3:12-14 "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances [quarrels] you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."

3. The Word gives us **encouragement** [Verse 4c]

Encouragement = Paraklesis = "To give courage and comfort"

Psalms 19:7-8 "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes."

4. The Word gives us hope [Verse 4d]

Hope = Elpis = "To anticipate with confidence"

The NT tells us to "rejoice in the hope of the glory of God (Rom 5:2), which is the eternal life that "God promised before the beginning of time" (Titus 1:2). That

hope “is stored up for us in heaven” (Col 1:5-6) and is therefore to be the focus of our attention as we “set our hope fully on the grace to be given us when Jesus Christ is revealed (1 Peter 1:13).

If our eyes are focused on the “main thing” – the eternal kingdom of God – then the temporal issues that bring division and disunity will begin to fade in significance.

II The Strong Are Characterized by Unity

A. Paul’s prayer for unity [Verse 5]

1. Unity requires **endurance**

Eph 4:3 “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

2. Unity requires encouragement

1 Corinthians 1:10 “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 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.”

3. Unity requires the pursuit of **Christ**

Philippians 2:1-6 “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.”

The emphasis here is not that we agree on every disputable matter. That isn’t going to happen. But we can decide to keep disputable matters in proper perspective – remembering to “major in the majors and minor in the minors.”

B. Paul’s goal for unity

1. That with one **heart** we may glorify God [Verse 6a]

One heart = Homothumadon = “To be unanimous or in one accord”

Joke: What was the car of preference in the NT church – Honda! They were all in one accord!

Psalms 34:3 “Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together.”

2. That with one **voice** we may glorify God [Verse 6b]

Voice = Stoma = “Mouth”

Glorify = Doxazo = “To give honor”

The ultimate purpose of Christian unity is not to simply please other believers, although we are commanded to do that. The ultimate goal of unity is to please the Lord and with one heart and one voice to glorify God.

The book of Acts provides us with evidence as to what can happen when the church displays this kind of unity:

Acts 2:44-47 “All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

III The Strong Are Characterized by Acceptance

A. They **accept** one another [Verse 7a]

Accept = Proslambano = “To take to oneself or receive”

Romans 14:1 “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.”

1. Just as Christ accepted them [Verse 7b]

Ephesians 4:32-5:2 “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

When we follow our Lord’s example in accepting and receiving each other in love and without judgment or condescension, we bring glory to God.

B. Their accepting attitude resulted in **praise** to God [Verse 7c-12]

To illustrate that it has always been God’s plan to bring both the Jew and Gentile into His kingdom, Paul cites four separate OT passages.

1. The Jews and Gentiles will praise God - Ps 18:49a
2. The Jews and Gentiles will sing to God - Ps 18:49b
3. The Jews and Gentiles will rejoice in God - Deut 32:43
- A quotation from the Song of Moses.
4. The Jews and Gentiles will submit to God - Ps 117:1
5. The Jews and Gentiles will hope in God - Is 11:10

Jesus predicted these events in John 10:16 when He said, “I have other sheep [Gentiles] that are not of this sheep pen [Jews]. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.”

The fact is the Jews and the Gentiles were both necessary and were both beneficiaries of God’s mercies. Therefore, it is wrong for the Jews to despise the Gentiles, because their very purpose for existing was to reach the Gentiles for the glory of the Lord (Gen 12:3). And it is equally wrong for the Gentiles to despise the Jews, since it was through the Jews that God brought them salvation.

IV The Strong Are Characterized by Hope

A. Paul's prayer for hope [Verse 13a]

Here we have one of the truly beautiful benedictions of the New Testament.

1. Hope produces joy

Joy = Chara = "Cheerfulness, calm delight, or exceeding gladness"

1 Peter 1:8-9 "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

2. Hope produces peace

Peace = Eirene = "Oneness, unity, rest"

Romans 5:1-2 "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God."

3. Hope is the fruit of trust

Trust = Pisteuo = "To have faith, believe, commit"

John 14:1-3 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."

B. Paul's goal for hope [Verse 13b]

1. That we may overflow with hope

Overflow = Perisseuo = "To superabound"

a. By the power of the Holy Spirit

Power = Dunamis = "Miraculous or mighty power"

Romans 5:5 "And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."

Conclusion

"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." Romans 15:5-6

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