**12/02/2023 Sermon – Accepting One Another**

**Romans 15:1-13**

All followers of Jesus are members of this family and Jesus wants us to all get along. One of the very last things Jesus did on this earth before his death was to pray for Christians to be united as one and to be filled with his love.

Two weeks ago we looked at Romans 14:1-12 and in that we saw that Jesus has made us to live in community together; to live in fellowship together. However, we are going to have different beliefs about things. We need to have the maturity to give people the space and grace to have those different understandings and perspectives, knowing that Jesus’ love and grace is able to accommodate us getting some things wrong in our judgements on disputable matters. We are not to look down on each other when people seem ignorant to us and don’t condemn one another when people’s standards seem a little lax to us. Rather we are to give each other space and grace to have differing opinions on disputable matters.

And then last week we moved on to the second half of Romans 14 and their Paul tells us that we should all be working on increasing the righteousness, peace and joy in our church family. In pursuit of these things, we are to seek to do whatever is possible on our part to edify and build up one another. We are not to create discord over disputable matters, particularly when that discord may harm the faith of a weaker Christian’s faith. Also, it is sinful for a person to do something against their good conscience even if that thing is not inherently sinful. So don’t pressure people to break their conscience over disputable matters. We are all working out our own walk with God and maybe God wants that person to be a vegetarian, even though as Christians we are free to eat meat. So let us be loving towards one another, being understanding of each other’s differences, giving people the grace and space to hold differing beliefs on disputable matter and establish in our midst the mutual edification society of Christ.

So, as we come to Romans 15, everything Paul has said is relevant. He is expanding on what he has just written but in a new direction. So we have to keep what we’ve learnt in the past two week in mind.

In Romans 15:1, Paul is again speaking of strong and weak Christians. Strong Christians are those with a strong confidence in Jesus and his faithfulness – their faith is not easily shaken. Strong Christians also have a clear understanding of the fundamentals of the Christian faith and less rough edges. Weak Christians are much shakier in their faith – it could get derailed by a destabilising event. They also may not fully understand all the fundamentals nor have full confidence in Jesus’ faithfulness yet and they may have more rough edges.

Last week we saw how strong Christians are to make accommodations for weak Christians on disputable matters. So if someone is uncomfortable with eating meat sacrificed to idols, then a strong Christian who has no issue with this, even though they know idols are nothing but carved blocks of wood or stone, should not eat meat when they are with that person, nor put any pressure on them to eat meat against their conscience.

So from here Paul says, that strong Christians are also to bear with the failings of weak Christians. When we’re talking about failings here, we are not talking about sin – where we just accept people’s sinfulness without correction or assistance in overcoming temptation and brokenness – we are talking about people’s rough edges. Smaller ways of speaking or acting which we find a little off putting or even at times hurtful. And again, this is in regards to weak Christians.

Although we always need a degree of this attitude in our relationships with the people we do church with, strong, mature Christians should have less rough edges and where our rough edges hurt others, we should be able to withstand the correction. However, this is not always the case with weak Christians, so we are to bear with these things to give them space to grow and increase in Christian maturity.

Following this Paul again reiterates that we are to act in accordance with the good of others in mind and be willing to sacrifice ourselves for the good of others. Paul then quotes Psalm 69:9, identifying Jesus as the suffering follower of God who suffers for God’s sake. “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” The “you” in this verse is God and the “me” is Jesus. Jesus bore the insults of people as they rejected the human incarnation of God.

Jesus did not come to earth so that he could enjoy the good life, rather, Jesus was willing to suffer for the Father’s sake and for our sake, so that we might be saved. Jesus not only bears our silly failings and short comings, but all our sin and punishment for it. This is our example to follow as Christians – we are to be willing to suffer the failings of the weak for the good of the weak.

In these verses Paul also picks up another point I want to quickly highlight. We aren’t to bear with people’s failings to please ourselves, but for the good of the other. So we are not to bear with people’s failings because it benefits us or to make ourselves feel superior, our motives in doing so have to be selfless and altruistic. We are to make sure people feel welcome as they come a be a part of our gatherings, even though they have rough edges and failings.

Romans 15:4, is about setting forth that Psalm 69 is part of the Christian’s life too, just as it depicts Jesus’ ministry of suffering. And that through these words we might know that God is faithful and it is par the course for strong Christians to undergo suffering for the sake of the Christian community and to know the encouragement from such passages that God will see us through. Thus, we have hope in the midst of whatever we must put up with. Which in the context Paul is addressing are the failings of people who are immature Christians.

It’s one thing to suffer like Jesus did at the hands of the unjust authorities who had him beaten and killed. But Jesus also suffered because of the weak faith and failings of his disciples who all let him down. Like when Peter denied knowing Jesus three times. This is quite a different type of suffering. It’s the suffering of being let down by people who should be there for you.

Some times our human weaknesses are going to see us let one another down. Or maybe it’s not that dramatic, maybe we just say something careless and hurt them. We are to bear with each other’s failings. Yes, this too requires endurance and the encouragement from scripture, to endure the failings of another person who we live closely with.

But the promise is this; with a maturity which includes the endurance and encouragement set forth in scripture to bear each other’s failings, comes a spirit of unity.

If I’m willing to give room for you with your different beliefs and some space for your failings and you’re willing to give me room for my different beliefs and some space for my failings, then a spirit of unity is the outcome.

So a spirit of unity is a promise. If we have this level of maturity then we will have that atmosphere of unity. However, unity is also a sign of whether or not there is true Christian maturity throughout the faith community. Wherever there is disunity amongst the people of God, this is either because there are those in the community who reject the indisputable aspects of the Christian faith, or because we don’t allow room for different beliefs on disputable matters, or because we are too touchy about the short comings others – in particular the failings of weak Christians.

However, if we do have that spirit of unity, then we when come together to worship, we will worship our God giving glory to God for his goodness, mercy, love and faithfulness which are the indisputable and important aspects of the Christian faith, as one people.

Do you see that? If you want to be in a worship atmosphere where it feels like we are just worshiping God as one, then we have to have the important and essential things of God, which we all agree on, at the centre of that worship, and just drop trying to convince everyone else that we are right and they are wrong on the disputable stuff and to get over the small hurts we cause each other, as we clumsily bump past each other at times.

But our attitude in bearing the failings of weak Christians is not something we do with a burdensome frame of mind. We are to continue to joyfully accept one another with all our little quirks and failing. We all have our little things which others might find a but weird or off-putting and we all have failings in some things – again failings in this context are not significant moral sins.

Romans 15:7, “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” Paul again brings us back to Jesus’ example which here, is of accepting us, even though we were sinners. And just as Jesus did this to bring praise to God, we accept each other, in order to bring praise to God. We are to make sure weak Christians feel welcome in the church family, and not feel as if they are not good enough, or they don’t fit in.

Paul then brings these ideas to the cultural divisions between the Jews and Gentiles and how they are to accept one another as equal followers of Jesus. Romans 15:8-9a, “For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy.”

Basically, what Paul is setting forth here is the idea that God made promises to the Jewish ancestors promising that he would make a new covenant with them which would establish a much better and closer relationship with God. So Jesus has served the Jewish people by fulfilling these promises which has enabled them to enjoy this better New Covenant. So in a sense Jesus has served the Jewish people uniquely by fulfilling the promises God made to them alone. However, as Paul sites numerous of examples of Gentiles becoming God’s people, God in fulfilling his promises to the Jews, will allow Gentiles to also become part of God’s people.

What this is saying, is that Gentiles are not to look down on Jewish Christians, because Gentiles have only been caught up in the salvation brought about through God fulfilling his promises to Israel. And Jewish Christians are not to look down on the Gentile Christians, because their acceptance into the people of God brings glory to God.

There probably was some hurting each other, going on between the Jewish and Gentile Christians as the Jewish Christians continued in many of their Jewish customs and the Gentiles continued to not practice those customs. Paul is affirming that we are to accept different cultural practices in the church, for God does not require Gentiles to become Jewish first. God accepts Gentiles as Gentiles into the kingdom of God. All those who Christ accepts; we must accept.

These principles articulated by Paul, have helped the church to include people of all cultural backgrounds and to not necessitate a homogeneity of Christianity. Christianity can include aspects of all cultures so long as the indisputable aspects of the Christian faith are maintained and preserved.

Finally, Paul finishes with a blessings, asking God to help the church in Rome to be a church where the joy, peace and hope of God reside. As well as being a blessing, Paul’s blessing serves as a reminder of what is most important for the church – the people of God working to increase the joy, peace and hope of the church community.

So having a spirit of unity and having a oneness of heart and mouth and mind, does not come from agreeing on everything with each other nor on never hurting one another. Unity is achieved through holding to the important aspects of the Christian faith, while giving people space to have differing beliefs on disputable matter. It is achieved through seeking to do whatever is possible on our part to edify and build up one another, including being respectful when other people’s consciouses are distressed by our beliefs, and we are to forgive each other for our failings. But ultimately our unity comes from all of us being made children of God and brought into the one family of God, as we respond to his love to us through Jesus Christ His Son and the power of the Holy Spirit within us. Amen.