

Confronting Our Own Selfishness Romans 15:1-13 (ESV)

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Dr. Ritch Boerckel

We get to look at Romans 15 now. There's only 16 chapters, and so about a year from now, we'll be able to finish the book. (Laughter!) We're going to take three verses today. We're going to read through seven verses. What a sweet section! God has been teaching us much about what it means to relate to one another in worship in the context in which we disagree with each other over matters that kind of stir us up emotionally. So what happens when we look across the Sanctuary and we see people who believe different things about how the church should be and what the church should do and what emphasis and what priorities we should have? And they are things that are important to us. In other words, they kind of stir us up emotionally. "Boy, I wish our church would be like this!" And then this other group says, "I wish our church would be like that, though." And they're in conflict. So what Paul is teaching us, what God is teaching us through Romans 14 is: How do we worship God? What attitude do we press ourselves into so that Satan doesn't work to disrupt God's kingdom in our midst, and so that we can worship God and we can be a witness to a world that God actually has an answer for the chaos and brokenness that sin and darkness has brought. So that's what we're going to be learning from Romans 15. We're going to be reading the first seven verses together.

1 We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. 2 Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. 3 For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." 4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

What a great word!

God designed His church to be the sweetest, most beautiful place in all the earth. Jesus promises to build His church. Every church that is a true church, that embraces the Gospel of Jesus in faithfulness, is not abandoned. It is not left to build itself. But rather, we have this great architect who comes down and works with us so that we might be this wonderful expression of God's kingdom; a little slice, a foretaste of heaven itself. God describes the beauty of His church in Romans 14, this way.

Romans 14:17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

God is communicating to us that the key characteristics of any true church have nothing to do with the disputable matters of eating and drinking. The key characteristics of God's kingdom as it is fleshed out in the church, are three-fold. It's righteousness, it's peace, and it's joy in the Holy Spirit. Let's take these separately as we gain afresh a vision for what Jesus' church is to be.

1. Righteousness

Think for a moment of a place where every person is submitting their lives to the Lordship of Jesus. A place where everyone looks to God's Word to direct their moral choices. They're not looking to their own internal feelings. They're not looking to the world around them. They're looking to God's Word. A place where people commit themselves to radically obey God in a world of chaos and disobedience. A place where sin, when it is committed, is quickly confessed and then is attacked like it's a terrorist that is found within the gates. A place where no one openly defies God's standards, and if one does, they are put out of the church so that their soul would be saved and so that the community would remain healthy and whole and pure, a place of worship. A place where people remain friends to embrace and where sin remains an enemy to attack. A place where people meet every week in order to express their love for the Lord by way of worship. A place where parents are honored by their children. A place where slander, gossip, fighting, assault, and angry attitudes against one another are actively put to death with the whole community involved. A place where people actively flee sexual immorality in thought, in deed, in entertainment, and where people pursue with a passion, purity in every sphere. A place where husbands and wives love their spouses and are faithful to them over the course of their entire lives. A place where people trust each other. They trust each other with their money and their possessions. They have no concern of being cheated. A place where falsehood, deceit, and lying are rejected in favor of personal transparency, truth-telling and humble confession. A place where everyone rejoices when one of them prospers and where all jealousy and envy is put aside. A place where every person has high expectations upon themselves to contribute to the community and they have low expectations upon how the community would meet their desires. The local church is righteousness in the Holy Spirit.

2. Peace

Think for a moment about a place that is a shelter of rest; a respite of calm in the midst of a world where friends fail and foes assail. A place where there is not much drama with people demanding more from others and with people making accusations against one another. A place where people commit in covenant to steadfastly love one another over the long haul of life. A place where relationships are unfractured even when pressured by trials, troubles and temptations. A place where people willingly give up their preferences and rights in order to serve their brothers and sisters. A place where no one discovers that the person whom they thought they knew turned out to be someone completely different. A place where bitterness and resentments never flourish, but instead patience, gentleness, and love dominate. A place where you could bring your wildest and weirdest friend and

know that they are going to be welcomed with love. The local church is peace (Shalom) in the Holy Spirit.

3. Joy

Think for a moment about a place that is filled with smiles and laughter. The smiles are not because the people experience no pain, no trials, no suffering. But a place where those smiles are produced by the hope that they have in God as they endure suffering. A place where hopeful words of gladness dominate conversations instead of dark words of despair. A place where people are constantly encouraged and built up. Where the people do speak truth to one another, sometimes correcting, sometimes even confronting sin, but such words flow from a heart of compassion and a desire for deeper fellowship and a desire for the good of the one confronted. A place where gladness can be heard, audibly heard in the singing of the church and in the praying of the church and in the preaching of the church. A place where people regularly tell their neighbors and their co-workers of the joy that Jesus can bring to a heart even in the midst of this world's brokenness. A place where contentment shines in the soul of each person and everyone feels a sense of awe that they are just allowed by God to be part of such a family. The local church is joy in the Holy Spirit.

I shared this description with my wife Kimberly and she asked, "How can we become more of that kind of community?" That's a great question! I reflected upon this passage that we're walking through and I thought back to where we began in Romans 12:1. I believe all of the rest of Romans is an out-growth, it's an application of Romans 12:1. I said to her, "There it is. There's the answer of how we can become a place of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, if we listen to God's urging."

Romans 12:1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

The church becomes that kind of community when every member commits themselves to radical worship. If we yield ourselves over to God and our bodies over to Him as living sacrifices, if we set aside the self-life and the pride which drives our own preferences in order to experience the life of Christ lived out amongst us and through us, then we will see the Holy Spirit working in powerful ways to bring about His kingdom. The presentation of our bodies as living sacrifices is rarely lived out among God's people through martyrdom and imprisonment. Now, it does happen, and it happens too frequently where people who present their bodies to God are imprisoned for their faith. They are ultimately martyred, especially in countries where it's illegal to be a Christian. And there are many of those countries. But for us, most often, the presentation of our bodies to God is something as simple as a commitment to lay down our preferences in the corporate life of the church in order to love our brothers and sisters. It's just that simple.

Now if you ask me to make a choice between either being burned at the stake for my faith or laying down some preference for my faith, I'm going to say I would much rather do this. I'd rather be in that context. And yet, this context is very, very difficult. Sometimes

this context, because it's such a clean decision, it's easier for a believer to make. It's a greater sacrifice, but it's more clear about what I need to do. But over in this context, we don't often connect it to our worship of God when really, it is absolutely connected to our worship of God. God makes it connected through Romans 14 and 15.

If God desires His church to be a place of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, why don't we experience more of that? In a word, the answer is selfishness. We are too self-centered. We are driven by our own priorities. And people that are driven by their own priorities always stray away from God's kingdom because we are interested in building our own kingdom. God has given us His Holy Spirit so that righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit can flourish in every church. His power is unleashed in us when we humble ourselves before God, repent of that selfishness, and we place ourselves in the care of the Holy Spirit through prayerful dependence.

This is what Jesus says to His disciples right out of the gate in His first sermon. In Matthew 6, the Sermon on the Mount, He says

Matthew 6:33 But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

So He says, "Church, disciples, seek first the kingdom of God." What is the kingdom of God? Well, it's not eating and drinking. I'm not asking you to seek after eating and drinking; these preferential issues. But what it is, is seek after righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. And in order to do that, we have to confront our own self-centeredness. Romans 14 and 15 teaches us that self-centeredness often shows its ugly head when a local church experiences conflicts due to disputable matters. That's what these two chapters are about. I point your attention this morning again to Romans 15:1-2. We first see that

Self-centeredness in the church community is confronted by God. (15:1-2)

God doesn't just let the self-centeredness go and grow without attacking it, without addressing it, without confronting it.

1 We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. 2 Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.

The assumption is that everyone who is reading this letter is part of a church family. And in that family, there are differences of opinion about matters that are important to us. In Rome, the differences affected the kinds of food that they would eat; especially that they would eat at their fellowship dinners, and the kinds of activities that they would enjoy on the Sabbath days. Today, most disputable matters don't concern eating, drinking and Sabbaths. But they concern things like church programs, the kind of meetings we have, and the by-laws that are in the Constitution, the music we sing, the outreach events, the missions commitment, the culture, and many other practical outworkings.

Here's the definition that I would offer to you regarding what a disputable matter is. A disputable matter can be anything over which people in the church disagree, but about which God has not clearly spoken. So over the things which God has clearly spoken and related to righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, we all submit. But what about those areas that are disputable, that are not absolutely clear? What is God's instruction to us when we experience that kind of conflict? And God's command here is for us to reach out in love to brothers and sisters who oppose our preferences in the church. He says

I We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak...

So he first addresses the strong. The strong are the people who know that in Christ, they are free to eat all kinds of foods. The weak are people who think that we're restricted in our diet and if we go beyond that strict diet, then we would be breaking our conscience before the Lord. "We're not sure that the Lord would allow that." So he first addresses this group called "the strong," who know that in Christ, they have freedom to eat all kinds of food. And he says,

I We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak...

So he's acknowledging that the strong are theologically correct on the issues of eating and of Sabbath observances. All foods can be eaten in freedom in Christ. But that doesn't release them to make any application of that theological truth. All foods can be eaten, but the strong have an obligation to the Lord, not just to other brothers and sisters, but an obligation to the Lord, to bear with the failings of the weak.

Note that he doesn't say you have an obligation to tolerate the failings of the weak. He doesn't say you have an obligation to endure, like roll your eyes and say, "Oh, brother. I guess we have to limit ourselves." But he says you have an obligation to bear with... That idea is coming alongside of them, showing understanding for their convictions. It is showing respect in spite of the disagreement. He says instead of tearing them down, treating them like second-class citizens and breaking fellowship with them over differing opinions, what you need to do is bear with them. And when you bear with them, primarily that means you yield your preferences so that you can actively build up your brothers and sisters in the faith. It means we stay with them. We love them. We live our lives for their spiritual blessings.

Selfishness is so very sneaky. It takes over our hearts and hides itself so we don't even see it in our lives. I would say that if you're not aware of a battle with selfishness, it's likely that you've been completely overrun by selfishness, because all of us are. We all have a battle with being self-centered, with pushing our own agenda. I've used this illustration about 15 years ago. I'll tell you an interesting outcome at the end. It's an illustration of going to a church social function where there is a potluck. There's yards and yards of food on this table. And there's a big line. I would get in line and I would look over there and I would see deviled eggs. Now, I love deviled eggs! My wife doesn't love deviled eggs, so I don't ever have deviled eggs at home. (Laughter!) And I look and say, "Hey! There's some deviled eggs!" I get in line and I hope there's a deviled egg for

me when I get to the deviled eggs. I wasn't thinking about anyone standing behind me and about whether there was going to be any deviled eggs for them. I'm only thinking about, "Is there going to be a deviled egg when I get there?" One of the members in our church likes to say, "Let's get in line before all the greedy people eat the good food." (Laughter!) Selfishness is so sneaky!

And then if I get up there and there's one deviled egg left, I don't want to appear selfish. So I might say, "Hey, does anybody want this last deviled egg?" And of course, nobody is going to say, "Yes, I do." But by saying that, I'm sort of off-the-hook from taking it. I still don't look selfish even while I am selfish. Selfishness wants to appear unselfish. And that's how sneaky our sin is. And that's why God is so very direct in addressing self-centeredness.

The outcome the last time I shared this illustration was that the next week, I had like 150 deviled eggs on my desk. (Laughter!) Everybody brought me deviled eggs. So don't do that. That's not the point of sharing this illustration. (Laughter!)

There is a funny line in a silly song from the musical *My Fair Lady* that illustrates this selfish kind of nature that's in us.

*The Lord above made man to help his neighbor,
No matter where, on land, or sea, or foam.
The Lord above made man to help his neighbor-but
With a little bit of luck, With a little bit of luck,
When he comes around you won't be home!*

The idea is that we acknowledge we're supposed to help our neighbor, but I just hope I'm gone when he needs me. If he comes on a Saturday morning to ask me to come help put a roof on his house, wouldn't it be great if I just happen to be out of town that day? You're going to feel guilty if you're home to say, "No, I'm not going to come help you." But with a little bit of luck, with a little bit of luck, you won't be home when he comes around. And that's what our selfishness drives us toward. It drives us toward an appearance of love, without the power. And the Christian who has been transformed by God through the Gospel says, "With a little bit of grace, with a little bit of grace, I will be home when he comes around. I want to be the person that God uses to help show that neighbor love and help them in the time of need."

Paul's concern in Romans 15 is that if we demand our own preferences in our local church, we will forfeit God's kingdom. That's his concern. He says this is what the kingdom of God is. It's righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. But if we don't confront our own selfishness over here, then we as a church will not experience the kingdom of God. Self-centeredness always presses the church to be about disputable matters. God-centeredness always yields disputable matters over to God and humbly pursues the spiritual health of others.

We see that little phrase that says “the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking. It is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” And we say, can’t we have both? I want righteousness, joy and peace, but can’t I also have my preferences regarding eating and drinking? And the answer to that question is no. We can’t! We have to choose. Am I going to live a kind of life that pursues my personal preferences, or am I going to be living the kind of life that pursues God’s priorities? I have to choose.

Self-centeredness says, “I want a church where everyone reads the same translation of the Bible. That’s really important to me. I want a church where everyone wears blue jeans and is really relaxed on Sunday mornings. That’s important to me. I want a church where a choir sings on Sunday mornings. That’s really important to me. I want a church where the music is really loud and really contemporary. That’s important to me. I want a church where the building is beautiful. I don’t want to worship in a storefront. That’s important to me. I want a church that allows the children to come in on Sunday morning, into the Sanctuary. That’s important to me. I want a church where they don’t take an offering in the service. That’s important to me. I want a church where everyone cheers for the Cubs. That is important to me.” (Laughter!) We could go on with dozens and dozens of statements like that. But here’s the issue. Those things are not important to God. None of these things are central to His kingdom. What is central is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Differing opinions over eating and drinking are not fundamental.

Imagine for a moment that you are a person who really does not like tattoos at all. It just kind of creates an emotional aversion whenever you see one. You don’t like that. Let me ask you a question. Would you rejoice to be in a church where righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit rule, but everyone there is tatted up? Self-centeredness says, “My preferences are my priorities. I don’t want to be part of that church.” God-centeredness says, “God’s priorities are my priorities. I rejoice to be part of any congregation where righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit abound! If Jesus is pleased with our church, then I am pleased with our church. I only care about the things that Jesus cares about.”

When we demand something that God does not demand, we will always move away from those qualities that God does command. When our preferences are central, God’s priorities are lost. The church is never bound together by disputable matters. We are bound together by the shared life of Jesus; our union with Him about who He is, about His mission that He’s given to us. We are bound together by Holy-Spirit produced righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

What can we do with this problem of selfishness that plagues every one of us; that attacks every one of our hearts? None of us are immune from the battle! And that’s where God gives us such wonderful, wonderful resources. We’re only going to look at one of these resources this morning, in verse 3. We’ll take the next, the next time we’re together.

Self-Centeredness in the church community is put to death through...

1. The example of Christ Jesus. (15:3, 7-12)

It's through the example of Christ that we set before us and fix our eyes upon. We meditate upon His servant's heart and our meditation upon Christ through prayer, through the Gospel, is used of God to transform us. It's used of God to condemn and convict our own self-centeredness and to release us into a God-centeredness and to a vision of the gladness and satisfaction that is found in Christ and Christ alone.

3 For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me."

So he says let each of us please his neighbor for the neighbor's good, to build them up. We say, why? Well here's the answer. "For Christ did not please Himself." He quotes from Psalm 69. He's talking about the Messiah. The reproaches that were attacking God Himself fell upon God's Messiah, God's Son.

What we learn here is that whenever there's a struggle, whenever there's a battle, whenever there's an issue to overcome, God always points us to Christ. He always points us to Jesus, His Son. Jesus Christ is our Savior. Jesus Christ is our Redeemer. Jesus is our strength. He is our shepherd. Jesus is our life. Jesus is our King. Jesus is our Lord. He's our brother. He's our friend. Jesus is our God. And here, God directs us to the fact that Jesus is our example. Jesus shows us the way. He first purchases us with His blood, and then He shows us the way to live with each other through His example, through the way He lived His life when He walked this earth. When He lived here in His human body, Jesus did not please Himself. Instead, He came in the form of a servant to be a servant. Jesus Himself would say

Mark 10:45 For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

That was the whole purpose of His coming down from heaven. And if we want to know what membership in a church looks like, we look to Jesus as our example. How did Jesus live? How did Jesus relate to people? How did He walk among us? And what we find here again is this very clear statement that Jesus did not please Himself.

John F. Kennedy famously said in his inauguration as President in 1961, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." This call sounds a bit outdated in our culture as citizens are taught just the opposite. You know, grab, grab, grab all the blessings and push away, push away all of the responsibilities! The privileges of citizenship are tied to the responsibilities. That was President Kennedy's message to the nation. He understood that if the citizens didn't embrace that ideal, then the country wouldn't survive.

On Memorial Day weekend we remember military service members who applied that principle to the ultimate degree. This weekend is about remembering men and women who died in military service to our country. And thankfully, not every citizen is called upon literally to give up their lives for this country. But some are. We need men and

women who are willing to die for our country, or our country will fall apart. It will be conquered by a foreign power. It'll dissolve!

When citizens are no longer willing to give up their lives, their desires, their preferences for the good of country, the country will cease to exist. So this Memorial Day, we pause to reflect on the over 1.1 million men and women who gave up their lives in battle so that we as a church can come together into this place on a Sunday morning and worship God without fear of people coming in and arresting us; of a foreign power coming in and killing us. We pray that our sons and daughters will not be the ones who are honored on future Memorial Days. Yet because freedom is always under siege and evil is always pressing, we know that some of our daughters and some of our sons will be the ones honored in future Memorial Days. What is true of a country is doubly true of Jesus' church. Jesus gave us an example to follow.

1 John 3:16 By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

We ought to be willing not only to give up some of these mild preferences, but we ought to be willing, on the basis of Jesus' example to us and His sacrifice for us, to be willing to lay down our lives for one another. Think about Jesus' life of humility and service. Paul expresses it most beautifully in Philippians 4.

Philippians 4:4-8 (NLT) Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. 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. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.

Every time I read that, I'm overwhelmed in thinking of the humility of Christ, God's Son. This was one who spoke the worlds into being and He took the form of a weak, helpless, nursing baby. This is the one who is infinite in power and greatness, and He allowed Himself to be encircled, encapsulated by a young woman's womb. This was one who enjoyed unbounded and eternal joy, who yielded up His gladness to endure cruel suffering set upon Him by the people whom He created. This was one who received worship and glory from all the angels, and yet, gave up His body to the shame of being stripped bare and hung openly upon a cross of disgrace. This was one who knew no sin, and yet who became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Friends, when we consider the differences we have with other brothers and sisters in Jesus' church, I urge you to look at Jesus, and look at Him intently. Look at Him deeply. Look at Him with a fixedness. Ask yourselves the question: Am I following Jesus? Am I walking in Jesus' steps? When we place our eyes upon ourselves, our attitudes and actions seem very justified. We seem like we can argue for a great rationale about why we think this and why we say that and why we do the other. But when we place our eyes upon Jesus, God convicts us of all self-centeredness, all selfishness. And then He gives us

grace to live the kind of life that leads to glory and honor. And that's the amazing thing! Whenever God asks us to yield something, it's so that we might receive something so far infinitely, eternally, massively better. A treasure that is great! That's why in Philippians 2, after telling about Jesus' humility, he says

Philippians 2:9-11 (NLT) Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Because God's Son humbled Himself and yielded over His preferences, God says, "I'm going to honor You for that. That's the way it works in My kingdom." And God offers us to enter in and to be partakers and to share in the glory of Christ. But he says, "Here's the path. It's the path of presenting your bodies to God as a living sacrifice. It's the path of putting your own self-life to death. It is the path of putting to death selfishness. Therefore then, God will elevate us with Jesus so that we can share. And it's unbelievable to think about some of those promises that God makes to us that we can share in His glory.

What would have happened if Jesus chose to please Himself instead of living as a humble sacrifice, as a servant? The answer would be, none of us would have any hope. There would be no adoption into God's family. There would be no forgiveness of sins. There would be no inheritance of heaven. There would be no spiritual life at all. We owe our lives to the humble sacrifice of Jesus Christ. So as we look to that, let's sacrifice our preferences for one another so that we might glorify God together!

5 ...live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That's what He's driving us toward as He attacks our selfishness. It's an alignment with how Jesus lived, how He taught, what He did. The question for us as we relate to Jesus' church is never to look out at the church and what the church does and how the church's culture is and the choices the church makes and ask the question, "Will I like this? Will I want this?" That's never the question. The question that God sets before us is, "Will Christ receive glory through this?" That's the question. He's worthy! So let's fix our eyes on Jesus and look to Him as our example.

I want to show you two pictures that illustrate the kind of harmony or unity that is possible. They're two very different kinds of unity. One is biblical; one is worldly.



The first is a picture of Cape buffalo. These are African animals; one of the big five. And you can see that there's five of these Cape buffalo and they're all facing outward with these huge horns. With those huge horns that are four feet wide, they are able to take on any predator; the strongest pack of lions. And that's what they're doing. They have a little calf there in the center. And what they're saying to the lions that are about them is, "I know you want to eat this one that is of our group. We are standing resolutely together to keep that from happening! That's not going to happen; not as long as we're here. We're willing to take the bites. We're willing to take the clawings. We're willing to risk our lives, but you aren't going to get to this one who is weaker amongst us, without coming through us." That's unity. That's a picture. And then we have another picture of unity.



Can you see that this picture is quite different? There's an eagle that's carrying a fox, that's carrying a rabbit. And they're all in the air. Have you ever seen an eagle and a rabbit and a fox together in the air on their own? There's a unity to that, isn't there? I mean, they're together. They're all up in the air. But the relationship in that unity is quite a bit different than the Cape buffalo.

In both pictures, the animals are bound together as one. The first picture represents what I'll call, organic unity. They're joined together internally by a commitment for the welfare and good of one another. The second picture illustrates organizational unity. They're organized and joined together externally by commonly held selfish interests. The eagle has a selfish interest. The fox has a selfish interest. And the poor rabbit just wants to be left alone.

The first kind of unity is sacrificial. "We will die for each other. We are going to be committed to one another's welfare. We care for each other. We will protect each other. We're going to give up personal preferences, personal comfort. Our unity depends upon our mutual pledge to one another." The second kind of unity is selfish. "We're going to feed off each other. We are committed to our own welfare. We care for ourselves. Our unity will last only as long as the others in this group are giving me what I want. The moment that the others in this group fail to give me what I want, suddenly these three will never be unified again." The first picture says, "I am here because I have something to offer you that you need and I am devoted in love to you." The second picture says, "I am here because you have something to offer me that I need. I am primarily devoted to me." When we think of Jesus Christ, what kind of unity did He model for us?

3 For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me."

I believe that Paul is reflecting here upon insults that Jesus experienced from mankind all through His life; all those reproaches. From His birth, He was described as an illegitimate child. His own family said, "He is out of his mind. We think He needs to go to a mental hospital." After, in power, releasing those who have been possessed by demons, the spiritual authorities and religious leaders said, "He casts out demons by the prince of demons. He's demonic!" In His death, those who passed by derided Him, wagging their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." Even the other criminals who were crucified with Him, mocked Him.

Why did Jesus endure that? The answer is because He was committed to offering life and offering a kingdom of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. And the only path for the Son of God to offer that to us was the path of sacrifice, the path of setting aside His own pleasure in order to give us life. Jesus is willing to bear the worst mistreatment without retaliation. He continues to serve those who abuse Him so that they might receive God's blessing. That's the point.

I want to read to you from a commentary by James Boice. I think this is so good in reference to these verses.

“But it’s important to remember that in these verses Paul is not talking about Christians standing against the insults and abuses of the world, drawing on the character and power of Jesus to do so; that is something that is also necessary. Nor is he writing about spiritual warfare. He is talking about a far lesser matter, Christians merely getting along with other Christians, the strong bearing with the limited understandings of the weak and the weak bearing with the beliefs of the strong, whom they believe to be in error. He is simply talking about getting along with one another. To come back to the point must seem almost a waste of Christ’s example, or at least an understatement of the case. But that is exactly the point.”

Christ accomplished so much more than this through His death and sufferings and His humbling of Himself. But He didn’t accomplish less than this. The very least application from God’s people ought to be, “We look at Christ. Let’s set aside our preferences in order to love one another.” That’s the very least application we ought to have when we consider Jesus.

In talking over these matters with a brother here at Bethany, a friend asked me a question that kind of caused me to pause. He said, “What would you do if the church where you were a member decided to sing loud heavy metal Christian music every Sunday?” That’s a good question. I hadn’t thought about that before. It actually challenged my belief in sound doctrine for a moment. It made me ask myself, “Will I really be led by what God says, or will I be led by my feelings, my emotions?”

After gathering myself for a bit, I told my friend that first I would acknowledge that this would be very difficult for me. When I hear that kind of music it kind of grates against me, against what I find pleasure in. It grates against my emotions. I don’t know if I could find enjoyment in that kind of music in itself. But I also know that my love and covenantal commitment to my church family supersedes any human distraction. So if that choice were made by the church and I saw that my brothers and sisters were being led into worship through that music, if I saw that my church family was more effective at reaching people in our community with the Gospel and seeing the transformation of God’s grace in people’s lives, if I saw that our members, through that means, were maturing in Christ, they were becoming more devoted, more obedient, their families were becoming more healthy in worship and in obedience and in service to God, I would rejoice.

I would rejoice to remain committed to my brothers and sisters. It would be hypocritical of me to say to my brothers, “I love you so much that I would lay down my life for you, but I’m not going to abide this music with you.” If I had to, I’ll put on little ear phones or ear plugs. That’s legitimate, to be able to be there. And then I would watch the words. And I’d try to end up as much as I possibly could in the worship of God’s people. But if I looked around and I saw, “Wow! Look at all these people growing in Christ! Look at all these people expressing righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,” and I could tie

that to that means, I'd say, "This is fantastic! I want to be part of the church all day long." Because the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking. It is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

It is not wrong to have preferences over many different disputable matters related to church life. You ought not to feel guilty over having strong preferences. It is also not wrong to biblically discuss the advantages of our preferences with other brothers and sisters in the church. It is a violation of God's kingdom to break fellowship over those preferences. At the point we break fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Jesus over disputable matters, we throw God's clear instruction from Romans 14 and 15 away and we say, "God, I am interested in building my kingdom." Richard Baxter put it eloquently.

In essentials unity;

In non-essentials liberty;

In all things charity.

So friends, won't you pray? Because we are dependent upon the Holy Spirit to create His kingdom. We can't create it, but by the power of the Holy Spirit whom God has given us through Christ, we can see it being created in our midst. Let's pray for God to be glorified through the way that we love Him, the way that we worship Him, and the way we love one another. In this manner, we will rejoice in glory and in honor on the day that Jesus Himself is revealed in glory. What a day that will be!