



“Obligated to Bear”¹

Romans 15:1-7

Currently, I’m reading a book analyzing the belief system of many secularists today in Western culture – especially in America. People who say they do not believe in a God, but they believe in “reason” or “science” (as though those things are opposed to faith). I’ve learned quite a few things from reading this book, and one of the statements jumped out to me comes from a man named Charles Taylor. In evaluating our current culture, he said that the secular moral order is essentially this: Let each person do their own thing, and . . . one shouldn’t criticize the others’ values, because they have a right to live their own life as you do” (Taylor as quot. in Keller, *Making Sense of God*, p. 97). Within current cultural context, many (if not most) Americans believe that true freedom is the ability to do whatever you want and become whatever you want to be and one reason why is because we have embraced a lie that person, individual freedom is ultimate. While I can’t remember who said this, one social commentator stated that, in essence, the mindset of the secularist is ultimately narcissism. We do what we do for ourselves ultimately. Even in serving others, we do it to make ourselves feel better about us.

But this isn’t a totally new issue. I think it’s just becoming more blatant. The 17th century philosophy, Blaise Pascal once wrote, **“All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.”**

What’s my point in bringing this up? Well, my question is, “What do you live for?” Or, “Why do you do what you do?” Have you embraced the mindset that personal, individual freedom and pleasure is the ultimate aim of life? That, do what makes you most immediately happy should be what you should seek after? I ask these questions because, in some ways, I think this is what challenged the Roman church. There were people who differed over certain matters or doctrinal opinion, but as a result, people were being led away from depending on Jesus. And, instead of depending on Jesus, they were simply doing what the others were doing because they were either pressured or they thought the others were more spiritual, so they just followed suit. In addition, it seems like the others thought they were right in calling for this. They lost sight of Christ, and were satisfied with people following them because they were right.

But Paul reminds them that the point of the church is God’s glory in Jesus, not them! The reality is that if your unity is around anything other than God, it will be torn apart. Even if not in this world, it will in the next. The only lasting, eternally fruitful unity is the unity that is bound around God’s love and grace in Jesus Christ.

¹ This manuscript is still in the rough draft phase. I recommend you utilize these notes in conjunction to the sermon to gain greater insight and clarity.

Now, as we move into Romans 15, Paul challenges the people to show that their mindset and actions must change since their unity is around Jesus. Instead of simply saying, “What makes me most happy individually” or, “I’m free to do this, so I’m not going to worry about the other Christian,” Paul shows that **we have an obligation to bear with one another in the church**. In transparency, that doesn’t sound exciting. You could have seen the title of the sermon, “Obligated to Bear,” and thought many things. One, you could have thought, “That sounds like to lofty of speech” (i.e. – “Much obliged.”). Or, you could have thought, “I don’t want to hear this sermon. I want something encouraging, not something that sounds like a weight to me!

Yet, in this text, Paul gives tremendous encouragement to the church by showing them *why* and *how* we can do this. And, ultimately, he gives the ultimate results of living this way. This should motivate us to live with obligation to bear with fellow Christians. So, before I say anything else, ensure you’re in Romans 15. I’ll pray and then we’ll read verses 1-7 together [Lorraine Palmer, FBC of Zeeland, Piatts].

15 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. ²

“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.”³ This is a strong confrontation to a secularist’s mindset. And, maybe even in reading these words, you’re confronted, too. Have you embraced sinful mindsets regarding how you relate to other people? When I ask that, you could think of harboring hatred for someone, but this verse is broader. If you don’t believe you are obligated to bear with the weak, then you’re harboring a sinful mindset.

Now, keep in mind the context. Paul is not speaking here generally about all people throughout the world, or even every person in Holland, Michigan. While there are passages in the Bible about how we as Jesus-followers should act and love the people in this world around us, here Paul is talking about how we relate to fellow Christians within our local church context.

Building off of what Paul has written in chapter 14, Paul now says, “We who are strong. . .” This is a statement for all those who have a firmer grasp on the ramifications of the gospel and how it applies to the Old Testament temple laws of worship. Paul places himself in this category as well. He knows, and feels free, regarding food, drink and all days being holy to God. Of course, there are others within the church that are still struggling with their conscience on these issues. While they know only Jesus saves, they struggle feeling the guilt or shame over practicing certain things that once were deemed sinful.

² [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 15:1–7.

³ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 15:1.

Yet, the “strong” in the church weren’t behaving correctly. In essentially creating a church culture where the weak would simply want to be like them, the people’s eyes are off Jesus now. Paul’s concern is that the unity will break away from that church and God’s glory will no longer be seen in this place.

I’ve seen this happen in churches before. Churches that get focused on what to do and what not to do. Churches that focus on the external dress and actions, and people simply try to live up to that standard. After a while, you can get “power players” who control the church, and Jesus leaves the place. People end up talking about the church in the community and say the people are a bunch of hypocrites. It’s so sad how people can quickly forget the gospel and thus walk away from God’s glory.

Now, Paul brings the strong to the point. Bear with the failings of the weak. You have this obligation. Listen, if you think you know the gospel and you’re growing, you are to bear with the weak. I remember, years ago, someone telling me that within church ministry, you need to “run with those who run.” While I understand that to one perspective, I hate it in another perspective. How am I to come alongside the weak if I’m running too fast? I should sacrifice my stride for my brother or sister in Christ! If you look at the words in verse 1, we have “obligation,” “bear,” “failings,” and then “not to please ourselves.” Yikes! None of these words sound fun or enjoyable. They definitely feel demanding and some of us might think they sound oppressive.

In this “free” society where we highlight individual liberty, do I really have an obligation to another person? Am I really my “brother’s keeper?” Yes, after all, it was Cain who asked that question of God. Then, Paul doesn’t simply say we are to bear with the weaknesses of the weak. He says “failings.” That’s even harder for us, isn’t it? We might be able to understand someone is “weak,” but when that weakness is expressed in sins, we can get very annoyed quite quickly. And yet, Paul says to “bear.” To bear means to continue to bear up under. The pain your weaker brother feels, you should be feeling. Their weakness and sins end up becoming things you become burdened by! But Paul says you should do this by choice and willing service. Then he states verse 2: **² Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.**⁴ Please keep in mind, Paul is not saying to be a “people pleaser,” in the sense that we just do whatever others want us to do. Paul adds, “for his good, to build him up.” From a Scriptural perspective, good refers to whatever displays or magnifies or points to God’s standard as the one who is good. Therefore, we are to seek to live and act in ways that build up the weak in the faith. We want them to grow in knowing and loving and pursuing and trusting in Jesus.

But Paul uses the word “neighbor,” which isn’t a common usage for Paul in this type of teaching. Why does he do this? I think he’s reminding us of the command in the Old Testament – and Jesus’ restatement – to love our neighbor as ourselves. And, when Jesus is asked, “Who is my neighbor?” how does Jesus respond? He tells the story of a Jewish man who is half-dead on the side of the road. The religious Jews don’t help him, but a Samaritan does. Many (or most) here are familiar with this story. But what I want to bring out of that story is that Jesus confronts the love of the people when expressing this parable. He shows us that love confronts us! The priest was on his way to the temple. He used the law to not touch a dead body to allow himself a free pass from helping a dying man. Instead, he ought to have been willing to be unclean or, asked others for help! But that’d be inconvenient. No, it’d just cost you! And, isn’t that part of the point? Love is costly. Our tendency is to make ourselves feel better by explaining *why* we didn’t love. We have other obligations. So, we feel ok. But, to love our neighbor is costly, but it’s gloriously costly as we will see.

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 15:1–2.

This is how the “strong” in the faith are to act. And, it is what it means to be a sacrifice to God that is acceptable to him. Right here, I want to encourage some of you here. Some of you may have burdens in your own personal life, but you also have friends, family and co-workers whose burdens have been laid on you. You might, at times, wonder “why” or you could even get upset and think, “Get off my back!” Right here, you have a reason to keep on going and moving forward in bearing burdens. This is gracious command of God. Others of you, though, you simply be thinking about your life and you simply say, “I have enough burdens in my own life. I don’t need to add other people’s drama.” That mindset needs to be confronted. So, now we’re going to move into these verses, and I’m going to move some sections around a little. We’re going to start by giving the ultimate aim of living this way. Then we’re going to get into *why* and *how* we live this way. So, let’s start with the ultimate aim of living this way.

1. God’s glory and our good is the ultimate aim of sacrificial unity (vv. 4b, 6).

Notice the end of verse 4 and also the beginning of verse 6. Both begin with the word “that.” You could translate it “so that.” Paul is making explicit what the ultimate aim of local church, sacrificial unity is. Let’s read these verses together again. The end of verse 4 says, “. . .that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. . .⁵ ⁶that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁶

Verse 4 says that sacrificial unity leads to us each having hope. Verse 6 says that the unity leads to united glory of God! So, the glory of God and our eternal hope are in view when God calls us to live this way. Let’s break this down a little more.

We’ll start with the end of verse 4. God desires that we have **hope**. What is hope? Can’t I have hope without sacrificing and serving fellow Christians? Not true, steadfast, eternal hope. The word “hope” has ideas of a bedrock confidence in what’s to come. Based on the context here, in verse 3, Paul mentions Jesus’ sacrifice and what he endured as motivation for living this way (which I’ll talk about in a little bit). But as Christians, people who have turned to Jesus from their sin and trust what he’s done in the place of sinners, there can be times and seasons where our confidence in Christ wavers. You can wonder, “Am I really going to make it to Heaven’s shores?” “Will God welcome me into his arms?” Sometimes the doubts get more intense and you can think, “Is there really even a Heaven or God?” Yet, hope stabilizes us. Hope anchors us in the Lord, and pulls us forward – increasing our assurance of things to come, things we don’t see yet.

Do you want this assurance and steadfastness? And, if you already have this, don’t you want more? Don’t you want your joy and assurance and confidence to increase in God himself? Then, Paul says our hope increases as we pursue sacrificial unity with other believers – not only with the believers with whom we agree on with most things, but with believers with whom we disagree or are burdened by. Our hope increases. How? Well, Paul says it happens **“through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures.”**

Look at the first part, “through endurance.” Our hope will increase, through endurance. A few years ago, my family was at Sleeping Bear Dunes, and we decided we were going to trek through all the sand and make it to Lake Michigan. Unfortunately, we did not bring socks or shoes with us. We didn’t realize how

⁵ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 15:4.

⁶ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 15:6.

long this trek there-and-back would be. About 10 minutes away from the water, around 11:50 AM, I thought to myself, “This sand is getting hot.” We made it to the beach. We all got very wet and cold, and then made our trek back. Within 10 minutes or so, we were dry, and all of our feet were burning. Our girls were younger, so Tracy had one on her back. I had the other on mine. And our boys were left to fend for their own selves with their feet! While moving forward, I was also scanning to see the next type of coverage. It could be a small plant, and rarely, there was a larger tree. We would run as fast as we could and then stop for a moment. Then, at times, there was nothing to hide under. I’d take my shirt off and step on the shirt. But we were motivated because we didn’t want to stay there! We had no water. And this wasn’t what we wanted to do forever. At some point, Tracy turned on her iPhone with Christian music, and she and I started to compare what was happening with the biblical teaching on Christian’s persevering in the faith. Even there, we were praying for endurance. And, amazingly, God gave it to us! We kept going and finally made it to the end. Now, we would never choose to go through something like that again. Tracy ended up with 11 blisters on her feet! But there were many lessons through this, and also encouragement to know that our bodies can endure more.

Think of this regarding Paul’s encouragement to the church. Through endurance, you gain hope. Honestly, the only way you would sacrifice for weaker people in the faith, and also bear their sinful burdens with them, is if you love Jesus. Now, Paul adds another motivation for living this way. In the midst of pure endurance, Paul adds the “encouragement of Scriptures.” When you’re tempted to give up, like Tracy and I were in the dunes, there are words filling your mind and heart. You hear the Scriptures speak to you in specific circumstances and they come alive and encourage you. You know, sometimes we don’t understand more of the meaning of Scripture until it’s lived out. You won’t understand the encouragement Paul gives when he says to the Corinthians, “The more I love you, the less I’m loved” if you don’t sacrificially love others. You’ll miss out on the encouragement of the gospel in your life if you don’t sacrificially love. But as you sacrifice and endure, and as you read the Scriptures, more things come alive in your soul and birth greater hope in the Lord!

You don’t do endure with others because it’s just a whole lot of fun to deal with people’s muck, but you do this out of the love Jesus has for you! You do this because the Scriptures motivate and strengthen you. And, as you live in that love, your hope increases because you see the Spirit working in and through you. You can say, “There’s no other reason why I’m doing this than God at work through me and in me.” And, as you may even see yourself grow and maybe the other people grow, you see a God at work! Thus, hope increases in you! If we don’t endure with people we miss out on the blessings of increased hope.

But there’s another ultimate reason Paul gives for living in sacrificial unity.

The glory of God through the united church. Verse 6 says, “that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Do you remember what Paul says is the essential sin of the human race, in Romans 1? They do not glorify God. To glorify means to exalt, to magnify, to treat as supreme (with your whole being). Instead, the human race rejoices in created things. And, not only that, as a community of people, we not only do these sinful things, we approve of other people joining in with us to love lesser things more than God. When humans fail to glory in God supremely, all other types of sinful manifestations come about.

Yet here, Paul says that through sacrificial unity, we could see a new community of people come together giving hearty approval of the worship of God. Just like people aren’t content to simply love their sinful things alone, so Christians (to a greater degree) should give hearty approval of the worship of God *together!* Listen, God’s glory should not only be your individual aim. God’s glory with the

community of believers should be yours (and our) aim as a church family! Because, when we live this way, Jesus says that we let our light shine before men. Jesus says that in the plural – not just individual lights, but the corporate lights! And, as Jesus said elsewhere, the world will know we are Christians by the love we have for one another – for fellow believers.

Listen very carefully here. Jesus came to rescue us so that humans could glory in God again. The ultimate expression of God’s glory being revealed in this dark world is when the church arises in sacrificial unity and shines the light of the glory of Christ!

So, the ultimate aim of God in us pursuing sacrificial unity is for our eternal good. Our hope! And for God’s glory. We see here God’s glory and his children’s good are combined. Why would you *not* want to embrace your brothers and sisters in Christ if this brings glory to God and builds your hope? Well, that’s a good question. So, let’s ask, “**Why** should we do this?”

Paul gives two answers in verses 3-4a: ³For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.” ⁴For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction. . . .⁷

The first reason *WHY* we should live this way is because **this is how Christ lived**. This past week, the elders continued doing a doctrinal questioning of Mick Nienhuis, who is an elder apprentice. At one point, one of our questions was something like, “How can people misapply the gospel and make an allowance of sin?” Then we explained a little more and said, “Some people say that God’s grace abounds when I sin, so let’s just sin all you want.” I wish you could have seen and heard Mick’s response. It was simple-yet-glorious. He said, “If Jesus did all to save you, why would you want to sin?” You could hear his heartfelt belief coming out. For those of us who trust and follow Jesus, we can understand Mick’s statement. And, this is what Paul’s saying here. We should live with sacrificial love towards the weak because this is how Jesus lived towards us.

Paul says Jesus did not please himself. Then Paul quotes from the psalmist. The reproaches that reproached God fell on Jesus. The scorn and mocking of sinful people against God fell on Christ! Oh, this is a glorious statement. Some think it unreasonable or impossible for Jesus to have substituted himself in the place of sinners, but this verse says so! Jesus did not seek to please himself, but he instead substituted himself for sinners. Let me explain. Peter tells us that Jesus entrusted himself to the faithful Creator. Jesus didn’t seek to obtain pleasure for his own pursuits. He trusted God and served. He trusted that the way up is down. He lived dying to self (and literally dying) that he might rise from the dead. Oh Ventura, think of this statement. Jesus, who Isaiah said was high and lifted up, with the train of his robe filling the temple. At his presence, inanimate objects shook and smoke appeared. In his presence, the six-winged seraph cry out “Holy, Holy, Holy.” And this One decided to take on the form of human flesh, coming in the womb, living in a family. The Immortal God who never sleeps nor slumbers, became tired. The One who is spirit took on flesh. The Ruler over all subjected himself to rulers of this age. He who could cause everything to disappear in a moment, submitted to the decrees of sinful men who sent him to die. And he bodily succumbed to death. Why? Not because he needed to. But because we needed it. When Peter confronts Jesus about his death and seeks to protect Jesus from it, Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan.” Why? Because Jesus came to take the place of sinners. God is just and sin must be punished. Jesus took that punishment for sinners. And then he rose from the dead, signifying that he won the

⁷ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 15:2–4.

victory over death and sin. Now, anyone who knows their need for forgiveness from God and turns to Jesus is forgiven! Listen, if that's you, you can cry out to him today!

But did Jesus *love* dying on the cross and experiencing the wrath of God? No. Yet, for the joy set before him, he endured the cross. What were the joys? God's glory, his exaltation and bringing people to God! The joy set before him was the revelation of God's mercy that triumphs over justice – and that includes every sinner who turns to Jesus being reconciled to God. When we think of this, we understand what Paul means when he says that Jesus didn't please himself. And so, Paul says, "That's how you're to live!" Too often, I think people can think "What Would Jesus Do?" And their answers to that question only relate to things they think are cool or tolerable. But Jesus said, "lose your life for my sake." Paul says, "Don't seek to please yourself. Follow in Jesus' footsteps." And again, "Why?" Because of Jesus' tremendous love for you! If he hadn't loved you this way, where would you be? In Hell. Now, Jesus, through the Spirit, is working in you to lead others to the Savior! Follow in Jesus' footsteps!

Paul then gives a second reason in verse 4. Verse 3 starts with "for," and verse 4 starts with "for." Here's another reason. **The Scriptures tell us to.** Whereas the church in Rome was arguing over regulations, Paul doesn't say the Old Testament doesn't matter, but instead directs them to what is explicit in the Old Testament. All the stories ultimately point to Jesus, and in all the stories, we're to be exhorted to live in godly ways. Think of the stories of people who gave their lives for following after God. Some died for their faith. Others simply endured through various hardships for the good of others. And Paul says all these stories are meant for you and me! Live in sacrificial love because the Bible says so – and also because Jesus is your Savior who did this for you!

But as you hear these words, you can think, "How can I do this?" We know we can't simply grin and bear the hardship. So, how can we do this seemingly impossible task? Paul shows us in verse 5.

How? Verse 5 says, "⁵ May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus. . . ."⁸ The answer to how is, "**God.**" Verse 5 is Paul's prayer for the Roman Christians. He prays that God will grant them to be able to live in this type of harmony.

By the way, I love the term harmony. Paul isn't saying that they have to all believe everything in unison. Yes, there are core doctrines that Paul has addressed from the beginning of the book. But, there are other matters like what he's spoken of in these chapters, that we should be able to sing in harmony on. And, you know what, harmony can be very beautiful to the watching world because it reveals something about us. It reveals that the melody line is not our personal preferences, but that our melody that we unify around is Jesus. That's why we say in our church *pursuing Jesus together*. That's why our logo has different sizes to the sides of the cross. It reveals our differences, but as the arrows come to the center, we show we center around Jesus.

The only way we can live this way is by God's glory. But, good news! God will grace us. He's the God of endurance and encouragement. He gives us the endurance we need to persevere in this. Therefore, we should heed the words of Paul to the Galatian church to not grow weary in doing well. And, God is the God of encouragement, through the Word that encourages us! Listen to his words. Pray he illumines your minds and heart.

⁸ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 15:5.

And, as God is the one empowering you to live this way, he does so in accord with Christ Jesus. If you're just doing something because it makes you feel better or you simply don't want to be looked down on, that's not God working in you. Your motivation is you. But when God is at work in you, you realize your actions are in accord with Jesus. Meaning, you're doing it in order to follow him, and you are aligning your ways to Jesus himself.

So, let me ask you something: If God is at work within us to do this, and praying for this is according to his will, do you think God will answer? Yes! Do you believe that if God is at work in us, that we should then live out that reality? Yes! God promises. Believe the promises and let's do what he's called us to do. That's why Paul says, **"Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."**⁹

Ventura, as I worked through this text, I thought it was very interesting that our mission statement and strategy can be found here. Paul is calling the church to unified pursuit of God's glory in Jesus. Then he says we do this for God's glory and for the building up of the church. In the end, this will lead to God's glory being proclaimed to the world. This is *pursuing Jesus together* in order to exalt God, edify the church and evangelize the world. May the God of endurance and encourage grant us to live in such harmony together!

Paul's started the argument as best he can. Actually, he's stated all this under the inspiration of the Spirit, so it's perfect! We are obliged to bear! **Let's welcome one another with open arms. Let's love one another with the transformational love that Jesus has loved us with. And, in all of this, Paul again states the ultimate aim: the glory of God. Show the world that God has saved you. Let's together show the world God has saved us! What do we live for? Simply to please ourselves? No. By God rescuing us through Jesus, our hearts have been opened wide to desire God's glory and other people's good. And, in that, we find greater hope in God.**

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⁹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 15:7.