

Romans 15:1-6 Modelling Christ-like conduct

Introduction

We live in a world of chronic unfairness in the distribution of resources. I am grateful for the significant progress made in our country over the last couple of centuries. I have never forgotten the haunting words of the great Baptist philanthropist William Quarrier, writing in his later years of an extremely difficult childhood growing up in Nineteenth Century Glasgow. He wrote: When a boy about eight years of age [1837 or 1838], I stood in the High Street of Glasgow, barefooted, bareheaded, cold and hungry, having tasted no food for a day and a half, and, as I gazed at each passer by, wondering why they did not help such as I, a thought passed through my mind that I would not do as they, when I would get the means to help others. (William Quarrier, *A Narrative of Facts relative to Work done for Christ in connection with the Orphans and Destitute Children's Emigration Homes*, 1872, p. 3) Later as his own circumstances changed he would become the answer to his cry as he more than any other person took responsibility for the removal of this blight on our society by persuading the nation that it was our collective responsibility to care for the poor and needy children on our streets. Sometimes the Bible is criticised for being too general in its guidance for the way we must live our lives, but such critics fail to grasp that God has intended us to receive principles around which to frame our lives rather than an extremely lengthy list of 'dos' and 'don'ts'. We have the moral law, the Ten Commandments, which give us the foundational boundaries for our relationship with God and with one another, but beyond that we have God-given consciences and intellectual capabilities to translate biblical principles into an appropriate way of life in our particular social context.

What the apostle will say in the first few verses of Romans chapter fifteen is a reinforcement of what he has already stated earlier in this letter, but Paul is underlining for us that we are not just to look out for ourselves and our families, however tempting that might be at times, rather we have an obligation to assist other individuals and groups of people who are less fortunate than ourselves. He hints that we might be tempted to think that some people have failed to live responsibly and been responsible for their own misfortune allowing us a reason to look unfavourably upon them. Therefore, the apostle wants to commend to us the conviction that a Christian is a person who is seeking to model Christ-like conduct in their daily lives. What does he highlight for us in these verses?

1. The repetition of a core conviction (Romans 15:1-2)

(a) Our obligation (Romans 15:1) *We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.* Paul in this later part of the letter to the Church in Rome is emphasising our responsibility to care for one another and for those who are better placed ought to do our best to assist those who are in greatest need of support. Sometimes a person is physically weak and needs assistance to do basic tasks around their homes or to do their shopping or to travel anywhere from their home. Although that is true it is unlikely that physical infirmity is the particular weakness Paul has in mind here. Almost certainly he has in mind the tension between Jews and Gentiles over issues like their different dietary preferences and quite different rules for maintaining hygiene in their kitchens, together with their different opinions about the observance of particular holy days and festivals. In the one church if one group or another insisted on getting their way at the expense of the other then any sense of fellowship within their ranks would be completely lost. However, it is probably best that Paul is not specific because the principle taught here is so easily transferable to so many issues. Whether at the personal level or in Deacons' and Church Meetings our focus is not to be on getting our own way, rather asking God to assist us come to decisions which are

most helpful and appropriate for the whole congregation not just a minority or even a majority. In particular it is a call for sensitivity so that as far as is reasonably possible we take everyone with us. Paul is acutely aware that he had failed in this area when he was a passionate young missionary. His treatment of John Mark showed great impatience and a complete lack of sympathy when the young man struggled to adjust to the hardship Paul and his colleagues endured on their missionary journeys. Luke reminded us in Acts 15: 36-41 of the painful split between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark. *Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.'*³⁷ *Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them,*³⁸ *but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.*³⁹ *They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus,*⁴⁰ *but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord.*⁴¹ *He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.* Barnabas the more mature older believer was practising what Paul was teaching here in Romans 14-15. Year later Paul grasped what he was doing and changed his approach to colleagues, including Mark. A decade later in his final surviving letter to Timothy, Paul has this to say of John Mark. *Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry* (II Timothy 4:11b). Undoubtedly Mark had got older and become more mature in his faith, but Paul had also changed and instead of retaining his earlier negative impression of Mark's capabilities he moves to focus on his positive qualities and how he can be a useful fellow worker in God's kingdom. Do I need to be more understanding of another brother or sister in Christ? Can I be a means of encouraging them to do better or become more the person God desires them to be? Do I need to pray for more patience? Each one of us will have our own personal experiences to reflect on alone before God? One of the significant features of the New Testament is that it shows the flaws and weaknesses as well as some of the strengths of the people God uses in His service. Our standard by which we measure ourselves is not another person or other people who might be in a nearby pew; it is the Lord Jesus whom we look to. When we grasp this truth it may make a real difference in how we work at getting on with others with whom it is sometimes difficult to relate.

(b) **Mutual edification** (Romans 15:2) *Each of us should please our neighbours for their good, to build them up.* Here Paul explains why this is so important. Now we must be careful to note that Paul is not saying that we should tell people what they want us to say and do what they want us to do regardless of whether it is appropriate or not! This would be insincere and lacking integrity. As a young minister knocking doors and chatting to people in their homes in the community I first sought to serve I heard so many encouraging promises about coming to church and doing this or that –things I wanted to hear of course! However, with hindsight it was obvious that a significant number of people were simply saying what they thought I would want them to say without any intention of following it through. In recent weeks most of the candidates seeking election to the Westminster Parliament will have knocked doors and spoken to people in town centres and other places. Almost certainly some of the people who claimed to support them will –if they vote at all- put their cross besides another candidate in the privacy of the polling booth. I am sure many other members of the public have correctly indicated to candidates whether they do or don't support that particular party, but only God knows the truth on that matter!

The key image here is from the building industry. Do I desire to be a demolition contractor or a builder? There can be a real pleasure surrounding demolition of condemned buildings. A crowd might even gather to watch- at a safe distance of course! In the construction industry it is perfectly acceptable to be a specialist demolition contractor who will clear a site to allow others to construct a new building or premises for which a person or company may be paying quite a lot of money. However, amongst the people of God it is a tragedy when some people

take it upon themselves to be demolition contractors causing real heartache within congregations. God does not appoint anyone to such a role but too many individuals over the years have chosen to act in that way. They may be a small minority, but even one or two individuals acting in this way can cause havoc seriously undermining the work of a local congregation. However, every Christian is called to engage in the spiritual upbuilding of one another. The term translated here *to build them up* is also an image from childhood of a toddler playing with their little bricks making a tower. The question for us all is this? How am I building constructive and healthy relationships with my brothers and sisters in Christ in this congregation? Don't wait for the other person to say hello to you if you don't know one another –take the first step! If as we should we seek to pray for one another then we can pray in a more informed way as we enquire of one another how we are getting on –not in a nosey way –but in a genuine Christ-like way with a view to encouraging and building each other up as Christians. In the field of team sports there are occasions of major shocks when a less talented team defeats a more prominent one that may be in a higher division or league. How is this possible? The key thing has to be the team spirit that bonds that group of individuals together to accomplish a common goal. A focussed and united church will accomplish far more than a better resourced and numerically stronger but divided one. The important point here, though, is intentionality. It will never 'just happen'. We have to make an effort to build one another up in simple practical ways. Sometimes what God wants us to do is something big and demanding, but in Romans 16:2 by contrast, it is a mindset, a way of thinking about other people that translates into a way of living day by day. I suspect that putting this into practice may include lots of little words of encouragement and occasional acts of kindness that may be minor in themselves but mean a lot more to the other person than we might have imagined. The effort put in here behind the scenes will bear fruit later in the spiritual harvest that is reaped from our work for God.

2. **The example of Jesus** (Romans 15:3)

(a)**Our Role Model** (Romans 15:3) *For even Christ did not please Himself but, as it is written: 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on Me.'* How do we deal with the disappointments we face in life? It may be someone else was chosen ahead of us at an employment interview? It may be a university place we missed out on? It may be a relationship failure? It may be handling someone's ill-chosen words or inconsiderate actions? The list could be very long because the range of experiences we may have in life –good and bad- can also be quite lengthy. If our primary role model is another human being then we will at some point or other be disappointed because no human being you are ever likely to see in this life is perfect. All of us make mistakes. All of us with hindsight would say and do certain things differently. We can sometimes have unrealistic expectations of fellow Christians –for the best of reasons because we have had a good experience previously! However, although we can and are encouraged by the words and actions of others at times it is best to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus Himself as our role model. He alone lived a perfect life and walked the walk totally consistently. If we ever wondered how Paul the apostle kept going despite the most extraordinary adversity the secret of His success at the human level was His focus on Jesus. His life motto was our verse for the year as a church, Philippians 1:21: *For to me, living means living for Christ.* In Philippians 2 he unpacked what this means for each one of us in our daily lives. He wrote these words to this new congregation of Christians in Greece. *Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.³ Do nothing out of*

selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:1-5). This is what Paul understood when he asked these Greek Christians to model Christ-like conduct. In the next section of Philippians 2 Paul quotes from a worship song used in the Early Church *who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage;*⁷ rather, *He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.*⁸ *And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!*⁹ *Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name,*¹⁰ *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*¹¹ *and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.* His constant and conscious obedience to the Father's plan for His life is evident as you read through the Gospels. In John 6:38-40 it states: *For I have come down from heaven **not to do My will but to do the will of Him who sent Me.***³⁹ *And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that I shall lose none of all those He has given Me, but raise them up at the last day.*⁴⁰ *For My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.'* Praise to Jesus for who He is flows more naturally when we are seeking by the aid of the Holy Spirit to live like Him.

(b) **The Illustration from Psalm 69** (Romans 15:3) *For even Christ did not please Himself but, as it is written: 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on Me.'* Paul, in this verse, quotes from a Psalm, Psalm 69:9 to illustrate the experience of Jesus. What is the significance of this quotation and what does that reference have to teach us at this point in Romans 15? First of all although Paul only cites part of one verse we need to keep in mind the possibility that he has in mind a larger section of the Psalm or even the whole Psalm in mind with reference to Jesus. the reason for making this point is that only Psalm 22 is quoted more in the New Testament with reference to Jesus. In what context then was this Psalm both applicable to Jesus then, and by application now to our lives in the present day? Who appeared to make life difficult for Jesus but could not deflect Him from continuing with the calling God the Father gave to Him?

(i) **His Enemies** (Psalm 69:4) *Those who hate Me without reason outnumber the hairs of My head; many are My enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy Me.* This verse was fulfilled concerning Jesus at His trial recorded in Matthew 27:23, where in response to a crowd demanding Jesus' crucifixion, Pilate asked, *Why? What crime has He committed ?* Jesus Himself cited this verse when speaking in the Upper Room on the night of the Last Supper. In John 15:24-25, in a context where He explained that the disciples would be persecuted because He was ill-treated also, Jesus said: *If I had not done among them the works no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. As it is, they have seen, and yet they have hated both Me and My Father.*²⁵ ***But this is to fulfil what is written in their Law: "They hated Me without reason."*** Sadly the very fact that someone follows Jesus will enrage a small number of other people. Every week thousands of Christians suffer abuse and oppression right up to martyrdom because of these enemies of Christ hate His followers because deep down they want nothing to do with Jesus.

(ii) **His Family** (Psalm 69:8) *I am a foreigner to My own family, a stranger to My own mother's children;* Joseph and Mary had a minimum of four sons and two daughters, in addition to Jesus in their family (See Mark 6:3 for details). Yet apart from Mary none of them wanted anything to do with His faith claims. His step-brothers thought it was actually embarrassing having Him doing what He did in public ministry. John 7:1-5 gives an illustration of this predicament. *After this, Jesus went around in Galilee. He did not want to go about in Judea because the Jewish leaders there were looking for a way to kill Him.*² *But when the Jewish Festival of Tabernacles was near,*³ *Jesus' brothers said to Him, 'Leave Galilee and go to Judea, so that Your disciples there may see the works You do.'*⁴ *No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret.*

*Since You are doing these things, show Yourself to the world.'*⁵ **For even His own brothers did not believe in Him.** Are you maybe the only Christian in your family? Do you get a hard time sometimes because of your faith in your own family? Jesus understands He has been there.

(iii) **The Sceptics** (Psalm 69:9) *zeal for Your house consumes Me, and the insults of those who insult You fall on Me...* In John 2:17-18 in the context of criticism from a hostile crowd gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover Festival John recorded these words: *His disciples remembered that it is written: 'Zeal for your house will consume me.'*¹⁸ *The Jews then responded to him, 'What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?'* No matter what Jesus had to say that day He did not convince those hearers. This is the verse Paul cites in Romans 15:3. Isaiah 53:3, a prophetic passage relating to Jesus' death on the cross for us, also fits in here also. *He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces He was despised, and we held Him in low esteem.* It is no difference for His disciples today. There will be some people you and I meet who may never be convinced by whatever we say. Do not be discouraged Jesus our role model faced the same thing and we cannot expect any better treatment than He faced.

(iv) **The Rulers** (Psalm 69:12a) *...Those who sit at the gate mock Me...* In his account of the crucifixion Matthew write these words: *In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked Him.*⁴² *'He saved others,' they said, 'but He can't save himself! He's the king of Israel! Let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him.*⁴³ *He trusts in God. Let God rescue Him now if He wants Him, for He said, "I am the Son of God."* (Matthew 27:41-43). But surely these were men of faith, religious leaders? They had the titles and held offices, but brought no honour to them by their rejection of the Messiah God sent to them. We ought not to be surprised that there are some religious leaders today who are no different. In an interview shortly after demitting office some years ago a well-known former head of a particular denomination in Scotland admitted that he seriously doubted the existence of God and was attracted to the priesthood because he liked dressing up and incense. He was neither the first nor the last religious leader to hold views in complete contradiction to the Bible.

(v) **The Mockers** (Psalm 69:11, 12b) *when I put on sackcloth, people make sport of Me...and I am the song of the drunkards.* In life there are people who want to make fun of others, especially when in a fairly large group. On their own it might sometimes be a different story. At the 1924 Paris Olympics the Head of the British delegation was quite unpleasant to Eric Liddell for his stance of not running on the Lord's Day. The issues may change but in every generation there are people who will mock and scorn people of faith. While on the cross Mark tells us the response of some of the passing crowd to Jesus in Mark 15:29-30: ⁹*Those who passed by hurled insults at Him, shaking their heads and saying, 'So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days,*³⁰ *come down from the cross and save Yourself!'* Even the two men hanging on the other crosses joined in for a time. *Those crucified with Him also heaped insults on him* (Mark 15:32b). With or without the consumption of some intoxicating substance there are individuals who mock and scorn believers for their trust in Jesus. There is little new in each subsequent generation, only its cultural form differs.

(vi) **God the Father** (Psalm 69:16-17) *Answer me, Lord, out of the goodness of Your love; in Your great mercy turn to me.*¹⁷ *Do not hide Your face from Your servant; answer me quickly, for I am in trouble.* Old Testament believers as well as those in the two thousand years since the Day of Pentecost can both be troubled by the apparent silence and inactivity of God. Yet it was no different for Jesus on the cross who felt most keenly the felt absence of God. Matthew 27:47 reminds us of this fact. *About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?'* (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?') Medieval era believers spoke of 'the dark night of the soul'; other Christians have used alternative expressions to describe this painful phenomenon in their experience. Yet there are times

when like Jesus our role model we trust our heavenly Father despite what we see and feel in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Paul here in Romans 15:3 in this reference to Psalm 69 makes an incredibly telling point that we in our generation, like Jesus in His two thousand years ago, must keep our focus and dedication in both our devotion to and service for the Lord. Jesus in His earthly life showed us the way.

3. **The importance of the Bible** (Romans 15:4)

(a) **Its contemporary purpose** (Romans 15:4a) *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us...* The Bible is a unique book of equal significance and relevance in each and every generation. It will never be out of date

(b) **Its inclusive value** (Romans 15:4a) *For everything that was written in the past...* All the Bible's content has something to teach us! This does not mean all is equally important but it is all there for a purpose.

(c) **Its Christ-centred focus** Paul's application of Psalm 69 to Jesus is clear and we have only highlighted just some parts of that Psalm that have reference to the life and death of Jesus (G. Scroggie, *Psalms*, Vol.2. p. 117 has more details). What Paul did here follows on from Jesus' famous sermon from the Old Testament to the two disciples walking home from Jerusalem on the Emmaus Road on Easter Sunday afternoon. Luke reminds us of Jesus' words on that occasion. *He said to them, 'How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken!'²⁶ Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?'*²⁷ ***And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself.*** (Luke 24:25-27).

(d) **Its practical purpose** II Timothy 3:15 refers to *the Holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ*; Our salvation, past present and future is found in Jesus and in Him alone.

(e) **Its divine purpose** (Romans 15:4b) *...so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.* The Scriptures give endurance and encouragement. It is equally given by God (Romans 15:5). The divinely inspired Scriptures say what God wants us to read and hear and obey. It is the resource we need to equip us to model Christ-like conduct.

4. **A Prayer for Christian unity** (Romans 15:5-6)

⁵ *May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had,*⁶ *so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.* In John 17 we have the high priestly prayer of Jesus. What is Jesus praying for His Church? John 17:20-23 records His precious words. *My prayer is not for them alone [the first generation of disciples]. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message,*²¹ *that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me.*²² *I have given them the glory that You gave Me, that they may be one as We are one –*²³ *I in them and You in Me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me.* Some Christians press for uniformity at the expense of truth. Jesus doesn't pray for uniformity but unity amongst His followers. Will you and I do everything in our power to be a person who enhances unity amongst God's people? In this and the earlier characteristics outlined by Paul may we model Christ-like conduct to the glory of God the Father, Amen.