

Encouragement Through Example Romans 15:3-4

We came last time and we looked at verses 1-2 of this chapter as Paul begins to wrap up his discussion on Christian liberty and how it should operate in our lives. Paul says in verse 1 that the strong, in other words those who are mature in the Lord have an obligation to bear or to help carry the failings of the weak. It might be someone, although they have not denied that we are saved by grace of Christ alone still have misgivings about certain practices that they still do. They still might not do any activities on Sunday because Sunday is a day set aside and holy to God. They would not think of going to a restaurant or going to a store. He says rather than being arrogant and demanding and living in light of your liberty to think of the struggles of the weak. We are to consider how our behaviour affects our brothers and sisters in Christ. Is this going to make them stumble? Is this going to cause disunity?

And notice the other-centredness of Christianity. It causes us not to please self. That is the command. It is not what I have a right to do or not do, but don't please self, but what the believer should do is seek to edify and please others in the church of Jesus Christ. I am always amazed at how often we complain. And most of our complaints are not about God is not being glorified but how something or someone affects us, or makes our life more difficult, or even how they constrict our behaviour. The mission that God has given us in the church is something that we are all to be involved in and that is making and maturing disciples. And the chief end of the church is maturing those in Christ. When people are growing they not only minister to others but they reach out. They become testimonies of the saving grace of Christ. And others come to Christ and are brought into the body and then that process continues on.

But all are to be active. Church many times is more of something we join for personal benefits. I want to have a better marriage, or my children to have certain programs. Yes, I want the church to preach the Bible but I do not want anything or very little to be asked of me. That is why these other centred passages of Scripture seem so foreign. It must have been something necessary in the ancient world, but not our world. Everything exists to make my life better and easier. Even God revolves around me. He exists to bring to pass my dreams and aspirations. And it is amazing that the word "please" is used three times in the opening three chapters. And we are never told to please self. In this world that is consumed with the philosophy you have to love and take care of yourself, and that philosophy has entered the church, this passage and the whole bent of the New Testament Church seems so foreign to us.

But what he presents to us in verses 3-4 is the example of Christ and the testimony of Scripture that creates Christ-like servants that are other-centred individuals. And if you are not seeking and involved in the lives of others, if your Christianity is not aiding to build up others and encourage them in the faith, if you are not seeking to be involved in the lives of others, then you have to wonder if you are truly growing in Christ. Because one of the signs of Christ being formed in us is what we see of Christ in the Scriptures. There is a self-forgetfulness, a humility that does not seek its own pleasure but seeks the welfare of others.

Are you involved in the lives of others? Are you truly taking the Scriptures and what they say about Jesus Christ and letting them change us? It is so easy to complain

when there is a legitimate pleasure that we could have, but it might cause offence or others to struggle to say that is not fair! But have you ever thought that God is giving you an opportunity to have Christ formed in you - to take the Scriptures and the gospel and live in light of them? As we seek to live other-centred lives I want us to see two points this morning. One, I want us to see the example of Christ, and secondly, I want us to see the encouragement of Scripture.

1. We need to see and follow the example of Christ. V.3.

Now this is something interesting because there was a book written a number of years ago called, "What Would Jesus Do?" And it was written by a liberal. Liberals basically taught that the most important aspect of Jesus is his moral example. They downplayed or denied his deity and the saving nature of his mission. Believers responded and said that Jesus is none other than Lord, and Saviour, and the most important aspect of Jesus' life is that he came to save sinners, and he could only do that because he was God in human flesh.

But the response to the liberals in this book was so fierce that it downplayed the significance of Jesus being the perfect man and that he really is our moral example of how to live in this crooked and perverse world. Remember Romans 8:28, "**And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.**" God causes all things to work for our good and his glory. But what is our good when things go so desperately wrong in our lives? Well, listen to verse 29, "**For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.**" It is that Jesus Christ might be molded into us, not his deity but his perfect humanity. That we might be little Christ's. That as people see us that they would see something of the life of Christ.

And I do not think anyone would disagree with what I have said thus far, but how do we know whether Jesus is being formed in us? How do I know whether this purpose of God is being accomplished in me? And that is a great question, because Paul has just commanded us not to please ourselves but seek to please and edify others, and then in verse 3 he says, "**For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.'**" Why should I when I have a legitimate right to do something, why should I refrain? Why do I always have to be thinking about someone else? And here is the reason if you want to be like Jesus: "**For Christ did not please himself.**" So of the whole goal of this life is not personal pleasure or some sort of self-fulfillment but to have Jesus Christ formed in us, then you cannot be Christ-like unless you do not please yourself. Unless it is about loving God and loving others.

Think about what Paul says here. He says think about others, edify others and refrain from personal freedoms and then gives the reason, "For Christ." In other to follow the example of Jesus Christ. Imagine what our lives would look like if Jesus Christ came to please himself. Imagine if he thought about his own immediate personal pleasure and ease. We would be people without salvation and those who are most miserable. Remember in John 6 where the Lord fed the five thousand and there later preached to that same audience in Capernaum and the vast majority left. And his

disciples say that this is a hard saying. Then listen to how Jesus answers, because this would be horrific in John 6:61-62, **“But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?”** What if Jesus said, “Okay, I am fed up. I am going to go back to glory and be worshiped forever. A person can only take so much. It’s time for me to think of myself.” What hope would we have? What if he did the most pleasurable thing at that moment? What if, and this is unthinkable, ungodly selfishness entered in and Jesus left? The hatred that surrounded the Lord ministry is amazing, yet he did not come to please himself.

And then we have this quote taken from Psalm 69:9, **“The reproaches of you fell on me.”** This is a Psalm of David, and it is an often quoted Psalm in the N.T. Seven of Psalm 69’s verses are directly quoted in the New Testament. Most are about the rejection of Messiah. Here, David is saying because of his identification with God, and people’s hatred of the true God of heaven, “the reproaches of you fell on me.” In other words he suffered because he came to do the will of another. And this truth about Jesus you see over and over in the Gospel of John. He came to do the Father’s will, and because of that he suffered. John 5:30, Jesus says, **“I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.”** He came to do the will of another and because of that he suffered. In the Garden Jesus prayed in Matthew 26:39, **“And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, ‘My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.’”**

So what is the challenge of Jesus’ example here? The challenge is that we need to be willing to follow God and seek to glorify him at any cost, whatever it might be. And it is so easy to say we are willing to suffer for Christ, but are we willing to give up our liberty and freedom for another brother or sister in Jesus Christ? Are we willing to be patient with others if they are not in a place of maturity where you are? I talked to a pastor friend who is going through such a time as we all have through this pandemic. His church has really suffered. But here is the thing: we still have a church where so many have differing views. This is not a bad thing but evidence of God’s grace. Many gave up their personal liberties and still do for the testimony of Christ and kept the will of God and the gospel of Christ central. But it would be so easy to divide and split. And it is easy to be unified when everyone agrees with you politically or whatever, but then what are we unified about? Is it really the gospel? And then, somehow if there were a great cost people think they would be willing to suffer for Christ, yet they are not willing to follow Jesus’ example in small sacrifices for the welfare of others. It is not about your will. It is about God’s will. And if Christ is being formed in you there will be things that you will sacrifice for the welfare of others. Do you see any sacrifices of time or assets or whatever for the welfare of others? If Christ is formed in us our lives will not become easier but actually become more difficult. The reason is that we will live for the welfare of others, just like Jesus Christ. The spiritual destiny and spiritual growth of others will be paramount in our lives, not our time or pleasure.

2. In order to be other-centred and growing in Christ, we need the Scriptures.

We used to talk about a dusty Bible not being used, but how much is your Bible app used? How much are you truly in the Scriptures and in the Word of God? It is an amazing truth that the Bible we hold in our hands is the production of God. And it is given that we might know the unknowable God. God cannot be known unless he reveals himself. He has not only told us who He is but He has told us who we are, and how we relate to him and what his will is for our lives. He has indicated how we live in our marriages and communities and families and why he has made and established the church. He answers the big questions in life such as: why am I here? Who am I? What is the purpose of life?

And here is the amazing thing: if God really has spoken, which he has, then you would think that we would be consumed with every word and every page of what we call the Bible, especially how he describes why these things were written right here. But such is not the case. So often we are more concerned with politics or the latest controversy in the news or the latest in sports or entertainment. Many believers wonder why they have such a dry relationship with God and why God seems so distant and not vital. But how often are they in the life giving Word of God? How often are they seeking to see the fact of Jesus in the pages of this book and be changed into his image? There is a famine in many believers' lives, but it is not because of lack of opportunity or lack of time to read and know God through his word. We just do not put ourselves in a place where we can be blessed by the intake of the Scriptures.

And here is the amazing thing, because look at the amazing nature of the Scriptures, **“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.”** This is a further reason why we should remain steadfast in their resolve to love Christ and seek to love others. The things that were written in former days are certainly the Old Testament Scriptures, but we realize because all Scripture has one author that it applies to the New Testament also. And what was written in these various different accounts of men and women who suffered for their faith but kept serving God, kept their loyal love to him. You read that struggle through trusting God and He is faithful. When we come to the world of the Bible we recognize it. But this indicates, even when God's people struggle that God is present.

And let me make a couple of observations about this verse. One is that when he says, **“whatever was written”** what he means by that statement although unstated is whatever was written by God. Although God used men to write the Scriptures, what was written was written by God. So Paul could say, **“All Scripture is God breathed out by God,”** and the meaning is just like he spoke the universe and the world into existence, he spoke the Scripture into existence. Peter explains in 2 Peter 1:20-21, **“knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”** No Scripture is the ultimate production of Man, but God used their intellect, and historical situation and lives to write exactly what he wanted written. This is a stunning truth - this is God's Word! He wrote the book! It is His revelation!

But the second truth should be just as amazing to us and that is the Scriptures are profitable. That is what he means here when he says, **“For whatever was written**

in former days was written for our instruction.” It was written to teach or instruct us, to cause us to think and interpret our world differently than we would if we did not have his Word. Paul is not saying that every ancient writing is profitable such as the chronicles of Pharaoh or whatever, but he has in mind the Scriptures. Again, 2 Timothy 3:16, **“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching.”** You cannot sit under the teaching of the Scriptures and remain the same. Listen to Psalm 119:97-100, **“Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts.”** Do you get the meaning that this word will change you - that it is profitable? Again, has the knowledge of the Bible changed you? Does it continue to change you? It is meant to point and direct us to Christ. It is meant to instruct us to see God and his hand in all life.

And look at what specifically the Scriptures do - they do two things: **“that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures.”** Look at the word endurance. It has the meaning of staying and not departing. It has both a passive meaning and active meaning. The meaning is that I realize that God has ordained that I go through the things that he has ordained, and I am resigned to go through them, and at the same time the active meaning is that I keep following Christ and obeying him. I get up when knocked down. I do not use the world’s methods of handling difficulty and trials. I do not lash out at others or walk away. And notice that in this fallen world what creates that endurance in me is the Scriptures. And we all know this. We might come out to church or a Bible study really down and defeated, and we hear the Word, and there is light and direction, and this - encouragement.

I love the way this is worded - “encouragement of the Scripture.” I can remember someone once saying don’t bash me with Scripture. What I need today is encouragement. But that is exactly what Scripture does. It exposes us. It shows us who we are, but never leaves us there. It never just shows us our sin and just bashes us. It shows us the Saviour. It shows us the wonderful forgiveness that is found in him. It shows me when I am weak he is strong. It tells me I am not in this battle by myself. It encourages my heart that nothing will ever separate me from the love of Christ. The Word encourages me that change is possible not because of who I am but because of who he is. It emboldens me that I can face all the trials of this fallen world because God has ordained and planned this day and these trials and therefore he can give the necessary grace needed to follow Him.

And you know what the fruit of endurance and encouragement is? It is biblical hope. It is not the hope for better days, or people will somehow start serving me, but hope in Christ. God has ordained the events of our lives and the scriptural truths to create hope in two ways. One is to indicate a very unpopular message: our hope is not here. Our hope is not this life. When you try to make this your heaven it will become your torment. Whether through family ease or money or politics - this will never be our destination. Our hope is in Christ. It is to be with him. We will be fully in his image and we will be with him. As we go through all the trials of life and we are in his word, this becomes our great goal. We look to our great hope.

And you know what happened when that is our goal? Eating meat at the expense of my brother is not that big of a deal. I am willing to give up legitimate pleasures in this life because this life has never been my hope. It is easy to say that this is your hope and the driving motivation in your life, but if you are not in the Scriptures this cannot be your hope, because this is the tool that God has chosen to give us hope. If you are eating entertainment or getting excited about the latest thing the government has done that you hate, and you are constantly eating that, then when you are really called to give up for the sake of others, or to really seek unity - you will not. You want to see if Christ is being formed in you: how much are you truly involved in the mission of Jesus? How much are you really edifying and encouraging your brothers and sisters in Christ with the greatest and only hope worth hoping in? Be a person of the Book. Learn of the person of the Book. It will change you into a God-centred individual that will really care for others.