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## ME FIRST OR ME LAST?

Romans 15:1-3

By

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Romans, Lesson 97

### Me First or Me Last? Romans 15:1-3

Here are a couple of phrases that you will never need to teach your toddler: "That's mine!" and "Me first!" Because of the fall, we all come pre-wired to put ourselves in first place. We never hear a three-year-old naturally say, "You can have the last cookie," or, "Please, go ahead of me." When I was a boy and was acting selfishly toward my sister or brother, my mother would always say, "The way you spell 'joy' is, Jesus first, Others next, and Yourself last." I always hated to hear that because in my heart I knew that she was right. But at the moment, it never seemed like the way to be happy or joyful.

But Jesus taught that self-denial is the path to true joy. He said to His disciples (Matt. 16:24-25), "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it." The way to true and lasting joy is for Jesus' sake to deny yourself for others.

In our text, Paul continues his discussion of how those who are strong in their understanding of Christian liberty should relate to those in the church who are weak. The stronger believers (Paul classes himself with them in 15:1) knew that the Mosaic dietary laws had been fulfilled in Christ. They also knew that the Sabbath law was fulfilled in Christ. We're not under obligation to keep the Sabbath in line with the strict Old Testament rules. And they knew that they were free to drink wine, even if it had been used in pagan temple sacrifices, as long as they did not get drunk.

But in the church were weaker believers, probably from Jewish backgrounds, whose consciences would be bothered if they ate certain foods or violated the Sabbath (or other Jewish feast days) or if they drank pagan wine. So Paul's direction to the strong was that they should not flaunt their liberty to do any of these things if in so doing it caused a weaker brother or sister to follow their example in violation of his or her conscience. He sums it up (14:21), "It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which

your brother stumbles.” In other words, love for your weaker brother should trump your exercise of liberty in matters where the Bible does not give direct commands.

Now as Paul continues to emphasize the need to consider the spiritual welfare of our brother, he brings in Jesus Christ as the great example. First and foremost, Christ is our Savior and Lord; but also He is our example of self-denial for the good of others. To sum up Paul’s message here:

Following Christ’s example, we who are strong in the Lord should not live selfishly, but sacrificially to build up others.

I offer four observations:

1. Godly relationships in the body of Christ are of utmost importance.

This observation comes not only from these verses, but also from the fact that Paul has been hammering on this theme pretty much from 12:3 on. In that verse, he emphasizes the need for humility, since pride invariably damages relationships. He went on (12:4-8) to talk about how each of us is a gifted member of the body of Christ and that we are to use our gifts to build up others. Then he developed the theme of love, extending it even toward those who persecute you (12:9-21). After showing how Christians should relate to government authorities (13:1-7), Paul picked up again with the theme of love, saying that it is the debt or obligation which you never will be free from (13:8-10). Then (13:11-14) he showed how we should be morally pure in light of the Lord’s coming. And then (14:1-23) he shows at length how the weak and the strong are to avoid judging or showing contempt for one another. In all of this, Paul’s great concern was for love and unity in a church made up of people from very different and naturally antagonistic backgrounds: Jew and Gentile.

But why was Paul so concerned about healthy relationships in the church? Why should we be very concerned about this? Was it just so that everyone would be happy? No, Paul’s ultimate concern was that we would have healthy relationships in the church and, by implication, in our homes, so that God would be glorified. He writes (15:6-7), “so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore,

accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God." He brings it up again (15:9), "and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy...."

To glorify God through our relationships means to treat one another with such uncommon love and consideration that we make God look good as He truly is. Unbelievers should observe how we love one another and marvel, "How can this be?" Our answer is, "God has changed our hearts from being selfish to being concerned for the good of others. Because of His love in our hearts, we now gladly lay down our rights to help our brothers and sisters in Christ." So God gets the glory.

On the contrary, if we damage our relationships with others in the body of Christ, we damage God's reputation. That's true not only when we get angry with others or argue or say abusive things to them or about them. It's also true when we are just indifferent toward those whom we may not like. We don't care how they feel. We don't care about their needs. When we are indifferent or unloving toward those for whom Christ died, we tear down the work of God and He does not get the glory that He deserves.

So we need to put a premium on our relationships, beginning with our immediate family members and extending outward to those in the local church. Sometimes, even those who do not profess to know Christ recognize the importance of healthy relationships. They aren't doing it for the glory of God, of course, but rather for the personal benefits. But occasionally they do see it. The October, 2012 *Money* magazine has an interview (pp. 97-100) with Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen, who is one of the most influential thinkers in management today. He recently co-authored *How Will You Measure Your Life?* in which he applies business-school theories to finding happiness and integrity in life. I don't know whether he is a believer in Christ or not, but he says (p. 98), "I believe that the source of our deepest happiness comes from investments we make in intimate relationships with our spouse, children, and close friends." He adds, "The way I ought to measure my life is in terms of the others I helped to become better and happier people. That's the biggest thing to think about if you're not happy." So in the church, godly relationships are of utmost importance.

2. A major key to godly relationships is that we consider others above our rights and our needs.

Rather than pleasing ourselves (v. 1), Paul says (15:2), "Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification." By "pleasing ourselves," Paul means standing up for our rights no matter how it affects a weaker brother. He may also be thinking, as I said, of just being indifferent or insensitive toward others' needs as we pursue our own agendas.

By using "neighbor," Paul calls to mind the command from Leviticus 19:18, cited in Romans 13:9, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Paul uses "neighbor" in 13:8, 9, & 10.) "Neighbor" also extends the command beyond the church to any person we have regular contact with. In 1 Corinthians 10:31-33 Paul also incorporates the idea of glorifying God by pleasing others, even those outside the church: "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the *profit* of the many, so that they may be saved."

You may wonder how Paul's statement that he pleased all men fits with his comments elsewhere about not living to please others. In Galatians 1:10 he says, "For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ." In 1 Thessalonians 2:4, he writes, "but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts." How do these verses harmonize with pleasing all men in all things?

The explanation is: when you have to choose between pleasing others or pleasing yourself, deny yourself and seek to please others. Don't do anything needlessly to offend them. While the gospel message may be offensive, you shouldn't be! But if you compromise the gospel by toning down sin or repentance or if in your attempt to please others you do anything that would displease God (such as joining unbelievers in their sin), then displease others and please God.

So by pleasing our neighbor, Paul does not mean pleasing them at any cost. He doesn't mean avoiding or watering down the truth, because it might offend the other person. He doesn't mean avoiding confrontation that might upset your neighbor. He clarifies this by adding (15:2), "for his good, to his edification." It may be for your neighbor's good and edification to let him suffer the consequences of his sin. It may be for his good to let him fail even when you could bail him out, so that he learns to be responsible for his actions. It may be for his good to confront him with his sin and to show him from God's Word that his sin will lead him to judgment if he does not repent. But you should never do this out of a desire to get even or "make him pay." Rather, your sincere motive should always be for him to get saved and to grow in his relationship with Jesus Christ. Love sincerely seeks the highest good of the one loved, which is that he be conformed to Christ.

So a major key to godly relationships is that we consider others above our rights and needs. Most relational problems in our homes or in the church just stem from plain old selfishness. I want my way and if I don't get my way, I get angry or assertive. I demand my rights! When Cain grew angry and depressed before he killed Abel, God conducted the first "counseling session" in the Bible. He asked Cain (Gen. 4:6-7), "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it."

Keep in mind that God never asks a question in order to get information. Rather, He wanted Cain to think about the answer. Sadly, Cain did not respond properly, but God's question is a good one to ask yourself when you get angry or depressed about a relational problem: Why am I angry or depressed? How can I do well in this situation? What are the needs of the other person? How can I meet those needs to help him or her grow in Christ?

The interview with the Harvard Business School professor that I referred to earlier ends on an interesting note. Professor Christensen, who is 60, shares that four years ago he had a heart attack. Then it was discovered that he had advanced cancer that put him into chemotherapy. Then two years ago he had a stroke. He

had to learn to speak again one word at a time. He shares what he learned through these difficult trials:

“The more I focused on the problems in my life, the more miserable I was. And then somehow I realized focusing on myself and my problems wasn’t making me happier. I started to say, ‘Every day of my life I need to find somebody else who I could help to become a better person and a happier person.’ Once I started to reorient my life in this direction, the happiness returned.

“So if you look at retirement and you think, ‘Oh, finally I can focus on myself,’ you run the risk of becoming very bored very quickly. The most important piece of planning for retirement most of us need to think about—of course you need enough money to survive—is, How are we still going to orient our lives on helping other people become better people?”

Again, I don’t know whether this man is a believer in Jesus Christ or not, but his counsel certainly reflects both what Jesus and Paul taught. Don’t live selfishly, but consider the needs of others above your rights and your needs. This is the way to true joy.

Thus, godly relationships in the body of Christ are of utmost importance. A major key to godly relationships is that we consider others above our rights and our needs.

3. Those who are stronger in Christ especially have an obligation toward those who are weaker.

Romans 15:1: “Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves.” That statement acknowledges that there are going to be differences among members in the body of Christ. Some are strong; some are weak. Also, we have different ages, different genders, different races, different family backgrounds, different life experiences, and different spiritual gifts and natural abilities. All of those factors mean that healthy relationships do not just happen by accident. We have to work at them and learn to understand one another and accept one another (Rom. 15:7).

But Paul here especially puts the burden on the stronger believers to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please themselves. His exhortation implies that even strong

believers have a propensity to live for themselves. In other words, becoming more mature in Christ does not annihilate the tendency toward selfishness that we all battle due to the fall. One key mark of spiritual strength toward which we all ought to aim is to be servants, rather than to expect to be served. As Jesus said of Himself (Mark 10:45), "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." If we aim to be like Jesus, we should aim to become servants of others for His sake. You will turn a corner in your Christian life when you come to church with the outlook, "How can I serve?" rather than, "How can the church serve me?"

But in families there are babies who need to be served. They can't take care of themselves, let alone be expected to care for others. The aim and hope is that eventually they will grow up, learn to take responsibility for their own lives, and learn to serve others. Maybe someday, instead of crying when they're hungry and expecting to be fed, they will learn how to fix their own food and feed themselves. Eventually, maybe they'll even earn enough to buy their own food and, with a few miracles, learn to clean up after the meal! I know that sounds impossible, but that's the goal! But until that day arrives, the stronger have to help serve the weaker, both in the family and in the church.

Paul uses the same verb here ("ought") that he used in 13:8, "Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another." The strong are indebted to help the weak because in the past those who are strong now were weak and someone helped them. That's just the way that families work, including the family of God.

"Bear" does not mean "bear with," in the sense of "put up with," while you roll your eyes and think demeaning things about the weaker person. Rather, it means to carry or support, much as an older brother might pick up his younger brother who is too tired to walk any farther. Paul uses the word in Galatians 6:2, "Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ." Just three verses later (6:5) he balances this by saying, "For each one will bear his own load." The idea is, we are to help the weak with things that are beyond their ability to bear alone, but we are not to do for them things that they are capable of doing for themselves.

Since the tendency of the strong is to look with contempt on those who are weak (14:3), I would advise you to sit down and listen to the weaker believer's situation before you either offer help or write them off as hopeless. Sometimes weaker Christians are carrying heavy burdens from the past. They may have been abused or neglected as children. They may be plagued with past or present sins that have deeply wounded them. They may have mental or personality issues that hinder their growth. Before you can help a weaker brother or sister, you have to understand compassionately where they're at.

But perhaps some of the stronger believers would complain that it's unfair that they should have to bear the weaknesses of those without strength. They might impatiently complain, "Why don't they just grow up?" Granted, they should grow up eventually. But meanwhile, we are not to condemn or reject those who are weak, but patiently bear with them. To help us do that, Paul points us to our Savior, who laid aside His rights for our sake and for God's glory.

4. Jesus Christ is our great example of one who did not live to please Himself, but sacrificially bore insults for God's sake.

Romans 15:3: "For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.'" Just think how different life would be if Jesus had lived to please Himself! He wouldn't have submitted to the cross, with its horrible insults, pain, and separation from the Father. I realize that it was for the joy set before Him that He endured the cross (Heb. 12:2), but it was not joy in the short run! But He did it for God's glory and out of love for you and me.

To support his point, Paul does not refer to any incident in Jesus' life, but rather he cites Psalm 69:9. That psalm is cited or alluded to often in the New Testament with reference to Christ (Matt. 27:34-35 [parallels, Mark 15:35-36; Luke 23:36; John 19:28-29]; John 2:17; 15:25; with reference to Christ's betrayers or enemies, Acts 1:20; Rom. 11:9). The application is: In light of what Jesus was willing to bear for your salvation, shouldn't you be willing to give up your rights to help your weaker brother or sister?

Isn't it worth denying your selfishness to help others grow in their walk with Christ?

### Conclusion

Shortly after the end of the Civil War, General Sherman's victorious army was scheduled to march in a victory parade in a large city. The night before, General Sherman called General Oliver Howard to his room and said, "General, you were at the head of one of the divisions that marched with me through Georgia and you ought rightly to ride at the head of your division in the parade tomorrow. But I've been asked to let the general who preceded you in command represent the division. I don't know what to do."

General Howard replied, "I think I am entitled to represent my division, since I led them to victory." "Yes, you are," said Sherman. "But I believe you are a Christian, and I was wondering if Christian considerations might lead you to yield your rights for the sake of peace."

"Oh," said Howard, "in that case, of course I'll yield." "All right," said General Sherman. "I will so arrange. And will you please report to me in the morning at 9? You will be riding with me at the head of the army." General Howard's willingness to deny himself his rightful place led to the position of greatest honor (from "Our Daily Bread," June-August, 1983).

Are you looking for ways to serve others or is your focus on how others should serve you? Think about where you may be acting selfishly or standing on your rights. Focus instead on how you can sacrificially serve others and you will have rewards in heaven.

## Application Questions

1. Are you putting the priority on godly relationships that the Bible does? Is there a strained or broken relationship that you need to try to restore? What should you do next?
2. Paul says that we are to please others, not ourselves. But obviously, there is a balance point where we need time for ourselves or we will burn out. How do we determine that point?
3. When we do for others what they should do for themselves, we actually do more damage than good. Are you prone to this tendency? How can we know when we cross that line?
4. Read through one of the gospels and look for examples of when Jesus pleased others for their good, to their edification, rather than pleased Himself. Did this ever involve confronting someone in his sin? Did He ever say no to demands on His time? How can you apply this?

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