

Romans 15:1-13

I came across a wonderful ad in the lost and found section of a local paper. It read: 'LOST. Dog with three legs, blind in left eye, missing right ear, and tail broken. Answers to the name of Lucky!'

I chuckled to myself when I read it—you see, it reminds me of a lot of Christians, they're nearly as bad off! They struggle through life with a variety of burdens, they carry around with them so much excess baggage. Paul has been reminding us of the need to share each other's burdens, to support one another in the family of God. In this section in Romans 15, he outlines a trio of burdens that many are bearing:

In verse 1, there is the burden of tolerance. Paul notes that 'we who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.' We've come across both of these guys before—we spent a lot of time with them in chapter 14.

When it comes to a weak believer, we who are stronger have a responsibility to get alongside them and help them through. We are to succour them as best we can, we are to rally round and give them a wee word of encouragement every now and then, we need to affirm them in their faith and try at all times to bring out the best in them.

Mind you, sometimes it can be very hard going. Such folk tend to be incredibly negative about virtually everything, they're not the most optimistic of people, some of them are quite hard to get close to and you almost feel as if you're intruding into their space when you offer to assist them. Nevertheless, no matter how they respond, we owe it to them and to the Lord to support them.

Left to ourselves, we would probably run a mile in the opposite direction when we see them coming our way. I reckon most of us would much prefer to spend time with people who adopt a positive outlook on life rather than sit for hours with someone who is morbid and a bit doleful. That's why Paul pulls the plug when he tells us not

to please ourselves! When it comes to our time and how we spend it and who we spend it with, most of us are downright selfish.

We are to think about others—that is, the good, the bad, and the indifferent. We're to invest quality time and energy with those people that we would not normally give legroom to—after all, they are just as much a part of the body of Christ as we are! I know it's not easy, but who said it was meant to be? Let's face it, if the Lord treated us the way we sometimes treat others, we wouldn't have a leg to stand on!

One of the main reasons why we should invest ourselves in other people is found in verse 2, it's so that we can please them and it's for their long term benefit as well—we want to build them up! Any one of us can easily rip something apart, we can tear down a flimsy structure, no problem at all!

But, says Paul, I want you to strengthen others, I want you to be there to teach others by example and personal instruction. Paul is enthusiastically keen for us to not only tell them what needs done, but to show them how it's done! It's all about mentoring, being available to people one-on-one.

God doesn't treat us like bricks on a fast moving assembly line, he deals with each of us personally, individually—the God who runs the world has loads of time for you, and even when he's working with you, he still has time for me! Says something! I reckon that's why Paul says what he does in verse 3 when he shines the torch on Jesus! When all is said and done, who does it better?

When we were far gone, when we were in a pitiable state, Jesus didn't tell us he had no time for us or any interest in us; far from it! He pulled out all the stops for he saw beyond what we were to what we could become—he saw the potential in your life and mine, that's why he died for us at Calvary. That's why he was willing to take so much on the chin. That's why, when men hurled insult after insult in his direction, he took it all, he did it for us!

You see, Jesus didn't go to a cross on Calvary for the good of his own health. He went there for our eternal benefit and for our blessing.

He went there to redeem us from sin, to deliver us from the shackles of bondage, to emancipate us from the clutch of the enemy. Yes, he didn't do it to please himself, he did it all for us!

So, says Paul, if that's what Jesus did for us, the least we can do for one another is to follow his breathtaking example. We need to stop thinking about 'number one' and start focusing on the needs of others around us. God has richly blessed us, let's be a source of uplift and blessing to others!

I think we'll pause for a short music break, you can mull over some of these potentially life changing truths in the meantime. When we come back, I want us to take a fresh look at Paul's insightful comment in verse 4 as to the relevance of the Bible in the third millennium.

MUSIC BREAK

You can tell from what Paul says that he's a great believer in the relevance of God's word to every generation. The message of Scripture is timeless, it's always up to date. The fact that the apostle quotes from Psalm 69:9 in the previous verse is a clear indicator that Paul sees the incredible value of harking back to the Old Testament Scriptures.

The thirty nine books from Genesis to Malachi have so much going for them; there is so much to teach us, so much wisdom to impart, so many fascinating stories to recount. Even from the rich variety of historical incidents and data that is there, it seems to me there are many exciting and unforgettable lessons and principles for us to take on board. As they say, there's no point in reinventing the wheel! These inspired documents are replete with accounts of godly men and women who lived above their circumstances by riveting their eyes on God while ministering to the people all around them. True to form, we see their high points and their all time lows as well—nothing is missed out. Their biography is warts and all and that's where it is of maximum benefit to you and me!

When we stop and think about it, the Old Testament is a source of enormous encouragement to us to keep on going, even when the

odds are stacked against us. It's like igniting a spark in our Christian life! They give us hope for today, and thank God, a bright hope for the future. The fact is, some of our heroes from the past had a horrendously rough time on planet earth, but unknown to them, their names appeared in Hebrews 11, in that great chapter on faith! That's hope!

We'll take a short music break and, when we come back, we'll unpack some more of Paul's teaching in this chapter—there's a kind of benediction in verses 5 and 6, that's coming up next.

MUSIC BREAK

Paul's heart goes out to these dear folks in verses 5 and 6, his dream is for them to be united in heart and mind. Paul knows there is nothing more damaging to the testimony of Jesus Christ than a divided church. When God's people fail to get on with one another it causes all kinds of problems, some of which end up doing irreparable harm in a church split.

In no sense does the apostle expect us to look alike, think alike, dress alike, talk alike—far from it. We're in the same family, that is true, but we're not spiritual clones. We're all one, but we are not all the same! We're as different as chalk and cheese and that's great. How boring life would be if everyone looked or thought like me! Paul wants us to be one with each other in all those things that really matter most in life. His ultimate desire is that our visible expression of unity will impact the community where we live—people will see we're united and, in a fragmented world, that speaks volumes! It will also result in God being magnified and his peerless name being glorified. The fact in verse 6 that Paul specifically refers to 'heart and mouth' in his comments leads me to think that he knows full well that our verbal testimony is massively enhanced when we're one.

Sadly, the reality on some occasions is all so different. It hurts me to say it but a number of our evangelical churches seem to be overwhelmed by the infamous Tate family. Dick Tate tries to run everything. Ro Tate tries to change everything. Agi Tate stirs up

trouble whenever possible and Irri Tate lends him a hand. What we really need is more of this family's cousins—Facili Tate, Cogi Tate, and Medi Tate.

I reckon none of us wants to be lumped into that category that the late Dr Harry Ironside described as 'people who are very particular about breaking bread and very careless about breaking hearts.'

Hence Paul's desire for unity! It makes a lot of good sense, doesn't it!

We'll pause for a final music break and, when we come back, we will look at the remaining verses in this section, verses that challenge us to do a lot of things together.

MUSIC BREAK

The story is told of a retired couple who sold up and bought a fantastic motor home, they wanted to travel extensively in the USA during their twilight years. It had all the latest mod cons, it was superb and just what they needed.

One of its best features was the cruise control. On one journey up the West Coast the husband felt a little tired so he asked his wife to drive while he took forty winks in the back. The wife was delighted, she was like a child with a brand new toy! She just kept on driving, cruise control was a wonderful invention. Until she needed to go to the bathroom. She left her seat and did what she had to do!

There was a simple problem, for some reason the penny hadn't dropped with her that cruise control was not quite the same as automatic pilot, at least that's what she told the police after the accident.

That was part of Israel's problem—they had been operating on cruise control for centuries. They ignored God's plans for them to evangelise the Gentile nations. Instead, they either became involved in the pagan religions of the nations around them or they dismissed the Gentiles completely as unworthy of their evangelistic endeavours. They wouldn't pray for them never mind introduce them to the God of their fathers! Yes, it was as bad as that!

It wasn't until Paul was commissioned with a special mandate to the Gentiles that things began to change. That was when a lot of God's promises in the Old Testament to the non-Jewish peoples were taken seriously. You see, if they weren't prepared to buckle down and do something about it, God has his way of getting his work done! He raised up Paul, a man of grace and grit, a man who would enthusiastically champion his cause in the heartlands of Asia and Europe.

The impact of Paul's ministry was instant and phenomenal, we see that in the Acts. And, because of his pedigree, he's one of the few men who can take the bull by the horns and say what he does in verses 7-13. As a true blooded Jew working tirelessly among the Gentile community the people would be crazy not to listen to what he says! He sees it from both sides!

He tells them in verse 7 to 'accept one another'. His grounds for that request are well stated in the follow up phrase: 'just as Christ accepted you'. In other words, if Jesus accepted them with a no strings attached commitment, how can they treat each other differently? How they can be selective in the ones they welcome into their church family? The bottom line, when it comes to the church of Christ, it's an open house for all sinners, there's no place for us being picky and choosy.

When we go down that road, we show to the watching world a glimpse of the mercy of God. that's the thought behind verse 9 where Paul talks about the Gentiles glorifying God 'for his mercy'. It's a revelation to them, an open secret to them—that God has a heart for all men!

When the man on the street looked at the local congregation of Jews and Gentiles, all believers, it blew his mind wide open—it was nothing short of a miracle, the kind of thing only God can do! Two bitter enemies were reconciled in Christ, two hostile and implacable foes now working together for the kingdom of God—that left people amazed and overwhelmed. They could only marvel with a sense of awe at what the mercy of God had achieved and accomplished!

They are to accept one another; in verse 10, they are to rejoice together! The Jewish Encyclopaedia notes that no language has as many words for 'joy' and 'rejoicing' as does Hebrew. In the Old Testament, 13 Hebrew roots are found in 27 words, they're used primarily for some aspect of joy or joyful participation in religious worship. The Hebrew religion declares that God is the source of unsurpassed joy. The Gentile converts could now celebrate this delirious joy with them.

Two people groups, once poles apart, are now able to jump for joy and sing with elation to the God of their salvation. That's what God does, that's what grace does! That's also the general drift of verse 11 where Paul exhorts us to: 'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples.' In that context, praise is nothing more than God's people extolling his nature. It is not so much us thanking him for what he has done, but it is declaring to everyone what kind of person God is. It's making much of the character of God in the public arena. It's a noble affirmation of the many attributes of a God who can be trusted and a God who can be known.

The final couple of verses we're looking at today are verses 12 and 13, they challenge us to hope together! I suppose the two words we most dread to hear are 'no hope'. The world has no hope, the unbeliever has no hope. Those in the know tell us as Winston Churchill was dying, he reflected on the world he had desperately tried to rescue and this is what he muttered: 'There is no hope, there is no hope.' And with that he died!

My friend, there is hope! There is hope in Jesus Christ—Paul borrows from the Old Testament book of Isaiah to say that 'the Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations, the Gentiles will hope in him.' Wonderful words!

It seems to me that Jesus makes a difference between night and day, between darkness and light, between hope and no hope! I really believe, in a crazy mixed up world, the world needs Jesus —

he's the only one who can solve global problems, he can sort out your life and mine and give us a real reason for living.

That leads us to yet another mini benediction in verse 13 where Paul longs for 'the God of hope [to] fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.' It seems to me that Paul longs for us to know the reality of a life of overcoming.

He knows from personal experience that when our life is fully yielded to the Lord that our life is always the richer—we're on the receiving end of his joy and peace, two wonderful virtues that enhance daily life in a tough environment. The Lord never short changes his people, he gives us so much more than we deserve.

When we know his blessing, the cup of our life is full to the brim and overflowing—that's grace! He doesn't want us to be down in the mouth or down in the dumps, he wants us to be up there with the best of them—enjoying Christ daily. It's also true to say that comes about through the active working of the Holy Spirit in our heart.

He's the one who makes all the difference in your life and mine—and through us, we impact our world and influence our generation for Jesus Christ.