

Power to Please

by Ray C. Stedman

Do you remember the prayer of the little girl who once prayed, “Lord, make the bad people good and the good people nice”? This is really the subject of Romans 14-15 – making good people nice! One of the problems of the Christian church is that we may be quite correct in our doctrine and practice, but very irritating about it. How do you live with people like that? That is the problem of these chapters, and it is a problem that abounds everywhere – how to live with other Christians who persist in looking at things differently than you do.

Someone has well said that Christians can be compared to porcupines on a cold winter night, they need to huddle together in order to warm each other, but, as they draw together, their prickly spines dig into each other and they have to pull apart, so all night long it is a process of huddling together and pulling apart. Many churches, I am afraid, fit that description very aptly. This is the essential problem that Paul faces in the application of all the mighty doctrine that we have had in Romans thus far – the practical matter of getting along with other Christians.

The first thirteen verses of Chapter 15 deal with two major causes of division among Christians. There are those **divisions that arise from a difference of conviction**, of point of view. Then there are those divisions that arise from difference of background. These two factors are at work today to divide Christians all over the world.

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves; let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to edify him. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached thee fell on me.” But whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the en-

couragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. {Rom 15:1-6 RSV}

Now, please, don't look around and be glad that so-and-so is here this morning, listen patiently *yourself* as we look at this.

The first two verses give us the problem and the answer: The problem is those weak (or we might call them legalistic) Christians who have the irritating habit of differing with us about certain points of view. They are rather short-sighted, perhaps, in their outlook, and they grow offended at the liberty others feel they have in participating in actions and activities that the first group deprecates.

May I just plunge in and take an example that will sort of give us a flavor of what this is about? I think the fact that Christians differ in the matter of the use of the Revised Standard Version as compared with the King James Version in public reading and teaching is one example of a different point of view which can create divisions among Christians; and there are others of this nature, some far more serious than this.

What is Paul's answer to this problem? Well, he says to the strong (to those who feel at liberty to do these things) to bear with the weak, don't get angry with them, don't defy them, don't cut them off from your love and concern, but try to please them, patiently instruct them, and edify them to their own good.

This is Paul's answer. They don't need criticism, they need instruction. They don't need neglect, they need attention. It is easy for us to please ourselves in these things and do as we like regard-

less of what they think, but don't do that, he says. No, give some attention to what they feel and try to please them, if possible; but at least please them by trying to edify them. Try to instruct and help them to see the reasons why you act the way you do about these things, but don't cut them off. Don't treat them as something inferior in the way of Christians, but love them and please them in this sense. The illustration that Paul gives is that Christ himself (though he was Lord) did not please himself, but, rather, lived in such a way as to edify those around him. He didn't come to live for himself, and proof of it is that he continually met with reproach.

In Verse 3 he uses the quotation, "The reproach of those who reproached thee fell on me," {cf, Psa 69:9 KJV}. That is from the 69th Psalm, which is one of the Messianic Psalms pointing forward to Christ, and those are the words that the psalmist puts into our Lord's mouth as he faces the continual criticism from the Pharisees and the Sadducees in his ministry. In this prophetic passage, he says to the Father, "The reproaches of those who reproached thee fell on me." That is, Jesus says, "I didn't come to do my work, but yours. But, in the doing of it, I have met reproach. That reproach belongs to you, but it has fallen on me."

This, I think, is very indicative of the radical character of true Christian conduct. It moves quite contrary to our natural inclinations. We all like to please ourselves by nature, but, if we are living in the full strength of the indwelling life of Christ, we discover that it is quite possible to live to please our neighbor in this sense of edifying him to his own good. The result will be that we demonstrate a life that is upsetting and disturbing to people. They don't like it, and sometimes we are reproached for the very liberty that we engage in and the attitude we show of wanting to live for someone else. Have you ever noticed that?

People who are genuinely unselfish bother other people; they bother us sometimes. We don't want them around because they make us feel uneasy. They are a little bit too thoughtful of others, and they bother us. That is because the animal in us is very strong and altogether self-centered, and our initial reaction to someone who challenges our liberty is to say, "What do I care what you think," and to go ahead and please ourselves. But if we do this, we are just following the philosophy of the

world, because this is the way that the world lives and thinks.

There are three ways that I have noticed in which you can go about trying to please yourself:

1. There is, first of all, *the outright egotist*: The man who is openly selfish, who obviously doesn't give 'a snap of his fingers' what people think about what he does, who is selfish and doesn't care who knows it, who says, as the rhyme goes,

I live for myself, myself alone,
For myself and none besides,
Just as if Jesus had never lived,
And as if he had never died.

Their philosophy is, "Me for me, and the devil take the rest." There are lots of folks like that. In a way, you sort of respect them, because they are at least openly honest about what they feel. You know exactly where they stand, even though they are very irritating to have around at times.

Well, that is the outright egotist, and he is the most honest of the groups because he is openly being exactly what he is, and he intends to live and do exactly as he pleases.

2. But then there is what we call *the reciprocating egotist*. This is the man who looks at the first individual, and says, "I can see that being openly selfish creates quite a bit of difficulty; after all, it makes people strike back and creates enemies." So his approach is to say to someone, "Now look, I know that we both have our own interests at heart, but I'll tell you what we'll do: You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." That is, "You do a favor for me and I will do one in return." He is very careful to see that he always keeps his accounts in good balance, and, if someone does something for him, he immediately feels that he must by all means do something back and return the favor. It also works the other way, of course. If somebody does something evil to him, he insists that he pay him back in kind. This is the man who is saying, in effect, "As long as I get something for what I give, well, then I don't mind giving a bit." But, really, he is just as self-centered as the first one.

I think the majority of us tend to live on this level. We don't like to be openly, clearly, unmistakably selfish. We like to have it look as though we are doing good things, but we want it carefully understood that there is a reciprocating pattern expected. We want people to give back to us in some manner.

3. Then there is the third kind of an egotist that we might call *the deceived egotist*. He is the one who thinks he is very unselfish. He tries deliberately and honestly to please everyone, and he is always in hot water because, of course, he can't please everyone and he is honestly bewildered by his failure. He, too, is really just as self-centered and interested in self-pleasing as the others, because the thing that he wants above all else is to be popular or accepted. This is what pleases him, and he knows that the way to get it is to try to be as nice to others as he can, so his whole aim in life is to please everyone.

The result is that he really ends up pleasing no one, and he can't understand why his philosophy fails. It is because, basically, he is really still pleasing himself.

There are these various ways in which the heart deceives us in the philosophy of self-pleasing, and we attempt to look as though we are doing something else, while behind it all is still the same old basic drive of the unredeemed flesh to do as I please and to get what I want.

Now, if, as a Christian, we are behaving in any of these ways, then we are on no higher level than the world around us. We need to hear our Lord's words in that searching question that he voiced to his disciples, "What do ye more than others? If you love those who love you, what have you more than anyone else? What do ye more than others?" {cf, Matt 5:47 KJV}. This is not a Christian response. Rather, the Christian response is a radical thing, and, because it is radical, it is always disturbing. It upsets people, and it oftentimes results in reproach of one kind or another. A Christian is so anxious to please God, to give him his heart's desire, that he is no longer concerned about himself, and his concern is honestly for another because that is the person that God is interested in. This is what we have reflected here.

Isn't that the way that Christ lived? Remember, it was said of him on the cross, "He saved others, himself he could not save," {Matt 27:42 KJV}. It was true, wasn't it? He couldn't save himself *and* save others. He could have saved himself and not saved others, but he saved others and himself he could not save. This was said to him in reproach, and it was true. But, in the mighty mystery of resurrection, not only did he gain all the others, but he gained himself back again as well. *There* is a principle of the Christian life: We give up in order to get. This is what you will find reflected again and again throughout the Scriptures. Jesus said, "If a man save his life, he shall lose it," {cf, Matt 15:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24, 17:33}. "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it dies [if it gives up its rights, loses itself], it shall bear much fruit," {cf, John 12:24}. This is the principle that we have here. I think it was C. S. Lewis who said,

If the Christian aims for heaven,
then earth will be thrown in as well.
But if he aims for earth,
he loses both earth and heaven.

That is simply the reflection of this same principle.

This is further illustrated, not only in the life of Christ, but, also, as Paul says in Verse 4, by the whole of the Old Testament. All these men of old teach the same lesson, for "whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope." Who of you who heard that wonderful message of Ian Thomas' on Moses and the rod, and his repeated affirmation "drop it," will ever forget the power and the searching quality of that message? These Old Testament stories are designed to teach us, by graphic and lucid illustrations, the very points the New Testament sets forth in this respect; and all of the Old Testament is simply a record of how God taught men to live not to please themselves, but to please him.

- There is the story of Jacob, that scheming, shrewd operator (we would call him a BTO today – big time operator) who was always looking for his percentage in everything that he did, and scheming to get his own self-interest

satisfied. As you read that account {in Gen 25-32} you see how God dealt with that man through years and years of his life, until, at last, he brought him to the place where he wrestled with the angel alone beside the brook of Jabbok. There God touched him and rendered him helpless, and, in his helplessness, all he could do was cling to God, to the angel that wrestled with him, and it was then that his name was changed from Jacob (the usurper, the supplanter, the impostor) to Israel (the prince of God). What a wonderful picture that is for us of the way God is at work in our lives to teach us self-centered creatures the same truth!

- Take the story of Abraham {Gen 11-25} and his long pilgrim journey, and how God led him through crisis after crisis. Each crisis reflects something that you and I go through, and, out of it, we see the working of God in the ways of human affairs.
- Take Joseph and the time that he languished in prison {Gen 40-41}, when it looked as if all hope had failed and that he would spend the rest of his life in that dungeon – there was nothing but darkness in the days ahead. Yet, out of it and through it, God worked to bring him, in just a short time, to the very highest and exalted throne of Egypt.
- Then there are the stories of Samson, of David, of Hosea, of Daniel, and of all those men and women of God of the Old Testament.

Paul says that all of these were written down, not only to give a historical account of what they did, but, more than that,

- To show us how God teaches us how to turn from a life of self-pleasing, and
- To tell us what he has done to cut it off and render it invalid, and
- To make us able to lay hold of the indwelling life of Jesus Christ, and
- To walk in the way that will be not pleasing to ourselves but pleasing to him.

The Old Testament is really the richest commentary ever written on the New Testament. If you are coming to a place where faith is beginning to fail and your heart finds itself in the grasp of doubt, then turn to the record of God at work with men of the Old Testament. You will find, as you read thoughtfully, that your faith will begin to flame up again because “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God,” {cf, Rom 10:17}. It’s as the Word of God rings in our ears that faith is created in our hearts to lay hold of the truth we hear, and to make it available in our lives.

Verses 5-6 give us the result of living this kind of life, and the secret of it: “May the God of steadfastness and encouragement [of patience and comfort – that is kind of a God he is, one of reliability and encouragement and comfort] grant you to live in such harmony with one another [even though you have different points of view], in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Now, that is the end and aim of human life, to “glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Every Christian heart wants that. Is there any Christian who, deep down in his heart, does not want the glory of God in his life? Well, then, the way to produce it is to live in harmony with one another. That is the procedure. It says that even though Christians:

- Hold different points of view (they do not come to some universal agreement on doctrine – that isn’t what is necessary),
- Despite this, they can be so interested in one another and so concerned about one another that they can live in harmony,

and the result is that they glorify God. What is the key to it? It is tucked away in one little phrase which, if you miss it, you will want to live in harmony with others but you will find yourself quite incapable of doing it. The key is this little phrase, “in accord with Christ Jesus.” You see, when Paul mentions that Christ did not please himself, he is not holding him up as an example to follow, *he is lifting him up as a life to appropriate!* That is the big difference! We are not just to try our best to live the same way, because we can’t. Our own natural inclinations of self-pleasing rise up and ref-

use to permit us to do that. But we must never forget that these exhortations that we read in these last five chapters of Romans rest solidly and squarely on the teachings of Romans 5, 6, 7, & 8. It is back there that we learn that God has done something about this old Adamic life which naturally moves to evil –

- Has cut it off, and
- Has given us, in place of it, the indwelling life of the Son of God himself, and
- It is his purpose and desire to live that life again through us!

In the doing of it, we find it quite possible to do all that he does because *he does it through us*. This is what it is speaking of here when it says, “in accord with Christ Jesus,” that is, in *fellowship* with him.

Biting your lip, and trying to keep your temper is not the secret of living with difficult people; that is never it. The secret is a thankful heart which continually looks up to the Lord Jesus. It says, “Thank you, Lord, for the quietness and the calmness, the purity and the love which is available to me through you continually. Thank you.” A thankful heart and an obedient will that seeks to please another for his own good is the secret of living with difficult people. You try that and see if it doesn’t work.

The second section, in Verses 7-13, is that of **harmony despite differences of background**. The apostle handles it along the same line. He begins, first of all, in Verses 7-9a, with the problem and the answer:

Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. {Rom 15:7-9a RSV}

That is, there were two groups in the Roman church, as in most of the churches then, the Jews and the Gentiles. They were both Christians but they came from varying backgrounds, and the

problem of the divisions in the church arose over these varying backgrounds. I think it is difficult for us to comprehend how different these backgrounds were because, today, we don’t see it quite as strongly as they did then. To a Jew of Paul’s day, a Gentile did nothing right –

- He ate the wrong foods,
- He read the wrong books,
- He followed the wrong leaders,
- He observed the wrong customs,
- He even talked the wrong language;
- He did nothing right!

So, when these two come together in the church, there was considerable friction that arose between them – not because of any difference of their acceptance of Christ and their appropriation of his life, but because of these different points of view that came from their background. But Paul says, “Welcome each other, nevertheless. Receive one another because Christ has received you.” That is, all racial and class distinctions are to make no difference whatsoever among Christians. All these things are merely superficial, surface points of view. The important thing is that God has received a man; therefore, we must receive him because he is a brother in Jesus Christ.

This is a greatly needed truth these days. I think that if the Christians of the South had believed these words and grasped this truth, and had practiced it, all this tragic and heartbreaking story that is going on now in Mississippi, and in other places in the South, would have been avoided completely. I believe the fault of it lies squarely with the Christian church in the South because the Christians did not practice what the Lord himself had made so crystal clear. But yet, even here in the North, we are hardly above criticism in this respect – along either racial or social lines. There is a great danger of Christians becoming *class* conscious as well as *race* conscious.

I was reading *Eternity Magazine* this week, the January issue, in which there is a review of all the world events of 1962. William Peterson, one of the editors, comments about the national scene in this way:

Christianity became in 1962 more of a class religion. For those who couldn’t afford a second home but who didn’t feel uncomfortable

in a white shirt, church attendance was still fashionable. The labor movement peacefully coexisted with the church and neither bothered each other very much.

There may be a great deal of truth in that. We tend to be cliquish, and to think of our church as being restricted only to those in our income group, but we must always remember that, within the church of Jesus Christ, there are no distinctions at all. There cannot be, for God has received a man, and this must be our basis of our receiving him as well.

I had a couple introduced to me one day with the words, "This is our kind of people!" It made me wince when I heard it because the clear word of God is to welcome all who come in the name of Christ, because God has received them.

Again, the illustration of this is Jesus himself:

- He became a servant to the Jew and the Gentile alike.
- He came to the Jews in accordance with the promises given to the fathers.
 - He went about doing good and ministering to Israel, healing the sick and raising the dead, and ministering good throughout the length and the breadth of the land of Israel exactly as the fathers had foretold, as the patriarchs had promised.
- But he also came to the Gentiles.
 - Remember he said, on one occasion, to his disciples, "Other sheep have I which are not of this fold, them also must I bring," {cf, John 10:16}. He was looking out from the borders of Israel to the Gentile world, and, in accordance with Scripture, on the day of Pentecost the gospel began to go out to the Gentile world.

Paul says, as he quotes Scripture to prove what he said here, that all this was in line with what was promised when Christ came – both for the Jew and the Gentile. Then, in Verses 9b-12, he gives us these quotations:

As it is written,

**"Therefore I will praise thee among the
Gentiles,
and sing to thy name";
and again it is said,
"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with the people";
and again,
"Praise the Lord, all Gentiles,
and let all the peoples praise him";
and further Isaiah says,
"The root of Jesse shall come,
he who rises to rule the Gentiles;
in him shall the Gentiles hope."
{Rom 15:9b-12 RSV}**

Perhaps this doesn't strike us now with the importance that it did then, because, then, the question was hot as to the differences between the Jew and the Gentile. But, in application, it covers all the problems of racial, and creedal, and political differences that we find in our churches today.

You see, no Christian has the right to refuse fellowship to another Christian because of the color of his skin, or his national background, or his political creed – even if he comes from a communist country. (I know that it is not possible to be a convinced communist and a true Christian, but it is quite possible to be a true Christian in a communist regime.) I think we need to remember, in these days, this word of the apostle: "Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God," {Rom 15:7 RSV}.

Now again, in just one verse, Verse 13, we have the result and the key for making this possible:

**May the God of hope fill you with all joy
and peace in believing, so that by the power
of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.
{Rom 15:13 RSV}**

The result of Christian harmony is abounding in hope, the conviction of the final victory – that is what hope is. You remember that, earlier in our studies, we saw that hope really is a look at the present and an extension out into the future. Hope is:

- Looking at your present circumstances,
- Seeing forces at work in them that will change the whole picture in some coming day, and

- Rejoicing because, by looking at the present, you see the possibilities of change and the blessing of the future.

That is what hope is.

If you can't see anything in the present that is working that way, you have no hope. But hope is really a look at the present moment. Paul says that as Christians begin to overlook and bear with one another in these differences of background and outlook, and thus live in harmony, they then "abound in hope" because they see in the present circumstances the possibilities of unheralded blessings in future days. They see that this ability to love, in spite of differences, as it is applied to the eternal ages, is going to mean a wonderful blessing throughout eternity. That is hope, the abounding hope, and the procedure of it is in the power of the Holy Spirit: In other words, this is not a natural thing – to have hope in these days. It is not natural for people to live together in harmony when they have different backgrounds. It is not natural for us to expect to see blessing coming out of differences. No, it takes a unique power to do that. It takes the power of the Holy Spirit of God. And the key to the release of that Holy Spirit is given in the one word, *believing*: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing."

I want to stress that briefly because I think that we have gone astray in this respect. Oftentimes people come to me, and say, "What is the matter with my Christian life? I have come to a plateau where I seem to be so bored, and nothing interesting is happening, and I have lost all vision and joy and victory in my life. It seems to be so dull and lifeless. What can I do?" For years I think I gave a wrong answer to that. I said to them, "Well, are you reading the Bible?" And usually it turned out that they weren't. Or, "Are you having times of prayer?" And I gave the pat answer which is so easily given by most of us, "What you need is time for prayer and reading the Scriptures – prayer and the Bible." But I have come to see that this isn't the answer. What they need is to *believe* what they read in Scripture, and *believe* what they pray – that is the answer. These other things are merely mechanics which make possible the believing, but *believing is the real answer*. It isn't Bible reading, or prayer, or Christian fellowship that unlocks the power of the Holy Spirit. It is *believing* what you read or what you pray:

- When you believe that Jesus Christ indwells you,
- When you believe that he is all that you need,
- When you believe that he intends to act through you,
- Then you can act!

You discover that all that he is becomes visible through you and accomplishes all that needs to be done. The result is power and joy and peace, as Paul prays here.

This is the way I learned to drive a car, didn't you?

- I believe that, when I get into a car, there is gas in tank (and usually I am right) and there is an engine under the hood, and
- I believe that these are fully adequate to take this car over any road I choose to drive it, and
- I believe that all of it was designed to be responsive when I turn on the key and step on the gas.

So I do it, and it works. I don't get into a car, and say to myself: "I believe there is gas in the tank, I believe there is an engine under the hood, I believe that it will work," then get out and start pushing! No! I do it, I try it, I step out on it, and it works!

That is exactly what Paul is talking about. The God of hope cannot fill us with joy and peace if we don't believe – which means to act on what we know. But it is when we *believe* and *act* that the power of the Holy Spirit begins to work through us and causes us to abound in hope – for all around us are the evidences that God is at work accomplishing his purposes in our lives.

Let me read these two brief prayers of Verses 5, 6, & 13 again, because they are prayers that the apostle closes these problems with:

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice

glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. {Rom 15:5-6 RSV}

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. {Rom 15:13 RSV}

Isn't that a wonderful prayer for 1963?

Prayer:

Our Father, we can but echo the words of these prayers. How they sum up all that we need, as a body of believers together, in the understanding of one another's differences, and to be ready and concerned with each other, and ready to help and bless one another. We pray that we may begin to believe thy word, and act upon it, and, thus, discover the power of the Holy Spirit to make our lives such that we may abound in hope. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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