

Start your study here

Read Read, Record, Reflect, Respond

Prayerfully	Reflectively	Extensively	Creatively	Intensively	Specifically	Effectively
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Repeated
Alike
Different
Accentuated
Related
Think Context!

Romans 15:1-13

- 1 We who are strong have an obligation
to bear with the failings of the weak,
and not to please ourselves.
- 2 Let each of us please his neighbor
for his good,
to build him up.
- 3 For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written,
“The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.”
- 4 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.
- 5 May the God of endurance
and encouragement
grant you to live in such harmony with one another,
in accord with Christ Jesus,
- 6 that together you may with one voice glorify
the God
and Father
of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- 7 Therefore welcome one another
as Christ has welcomed you,
for the glory of God.
- 8 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,
- 9 and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.
As it is written,
“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles,
and sing to your name.”
- 10 And again it is said,
“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.”
- 11 And again,
“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples extol him.”
- 12 And again Isaiah says,
“The root of Jesse will come,
even he who arises to rule the Gentiles;
in him will the Gentiles hope.”
- 13 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. (ESV)

Review: Out of love for God and other believers, Christians are to understand and accept the differences in Christian practice of other brothers. Not despising or judging but willing to give up individual freedoms for the benefits of others.
Observations: 1) commands 2) reason statement, the "cause" 3) purpose statements, the "why" or end 4) Where does v 7 fit?
Question: How long do we need to "put up with the weak"? As long as it takes.

Outline
Exhortation for the strong to help the weak 15:1-6
Exhortation to mutual acceptance 15:7-13

Romans 15:1-13

Summary of 14:13-23, connection to 13:8
We still owe love

1 We who are **strong** have an **obligation** to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to **please** ourselves.

Their inability to practice their freedoms

"bear with" Galatians 6:1-5

Do what love demands

Command 2 Let each of us **please** his neighbor for his good, to **build him up**.

How does this clarified "please"? As long as it help

Ties back to 13:9-10

"for their good" Heb 10:19-26 Stir up, Stick together

Reason 3 **For** **Christ** did not **please** himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me."

We cannot claim more "rights" than Christ. He demonstrated love, humility and "bearing" with our weaknesses

4 **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**.

If the prayer is for endurance one can expect to need it—so the instruction to give up/give in for others may require long suffering

Notice that looking back at what God has said and done should produce hope.

5 May the **God** of **endurance** 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**.

One-another in Rom 14:1-15:13
Do not judge 14:13
Pursue... peace and edification 14:19
Think the same thing 15:5
Welcome 15:7

Purpose 6

Structural marker: 14:1 and 15:7
More than just "Hi, how are you." But full inclusion of both Gentile & Jews, strong & weak.

Command 7 **Therefore** **welcome** one another as **Christ** has welcomed you, for **the glory of God**.

Structural question—"for..." explanation of how/why we are to welcome each other, or explanation of why Christ welcomes us? Both may be true, but in the context the shift seems to point to Christ.

Reason 8 **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.

Having challenged the "strong" he reminds them of their debt to the "weak"

Purpose 9

12:1

As it is written, "Therefore I will **praise** you among the Gentiles, and **sing** to your name."

10 And again it is said, "**Rejoice**, O Gentiles, with his people."

Have we come full circle from 1:5 (along with ch 9-11)?
Christ a servant of circumcised—faithful
Confirming to Patriarchs
So that Gentiles (all nations) might glorify God

11 And again, "**Praise** the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples **extol** him."

12 And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles **hope**."

13 May the **God** of **hope** fill you with all joy and peace

Causal—this is the cause of joy and peace
If you are short on hope—believe

in believing, **so that** by the **power of the Holy Spirit** you may **abound** in **hope**. (ESV)

Working Idea (this is to help you see how the main idea was developed)

The strong are obligated to care for the weak for their own good
The motivation for persevering in ministry to those who disagree
Christ's example
To glorify God

Main idea:

Love seeks to do what is best for others and will lead to the glory of God

Teaching idea/explanation:

This is the last of three lessons all which address the issue of how do deal with those who differ or disagree with us.

This section will include what appears to be mainly repetition. But it does advance the argument with providing the motivation for not only “putting up with” the weak but helping them based on Christ’s example.

The motivation along with the exhortation will challenge us to endurance. This is not a new concept but it is a concept that does not resonate well in our fast-food, instant gratification society. Paul’s instructions remind us that doing the right thing does not always result in a positive response. We may need to keep doing the right thing for a long time.

Introduction

What is the hardest thing you have done—for a long time?

Pregnancy—9 months seems long, but what have you endured long term?
Illness
Damaged reputation



Talk about it

In the context of the church, Paul has been teaching us the priority of understanding difference, accepting differences and last week, giving up our own rights in order to protect the weak.

So, how long do we need to “put up with the weak”?
As long as it takes.

Review

The mercies of God motivate us to a consecrated life (living sacrifice) that does not allow the world and its belief system to force us into its mold, but which results in transformation by the renewing of our minds, leading to doing the will of God particularly in humble service within the body of Christ.

Love one another and the things that are good, hate what is evil. And in the midst of evil, seek to live at peace with all, not retaliating evil for evil, bless and minister to those who are against you. Submit to governing authorities who have been given authority by God. Seek to fulfill the Law by loving neighbors and doing good and living right (righteously).

A practical demonstration of love is seen in our acceptance of other believers, differences and all. Seeking to do all we do, to the Lord and out love and humility we seek the greater good of others to the glory of God.

Not judging their practices and it may require forgoing freedoms for the sake of the weak, so as not to cause them to stumble. Sacrificing our individual rights demonstrates love of others and a submission to God. Seek to maintain peace and build others up.

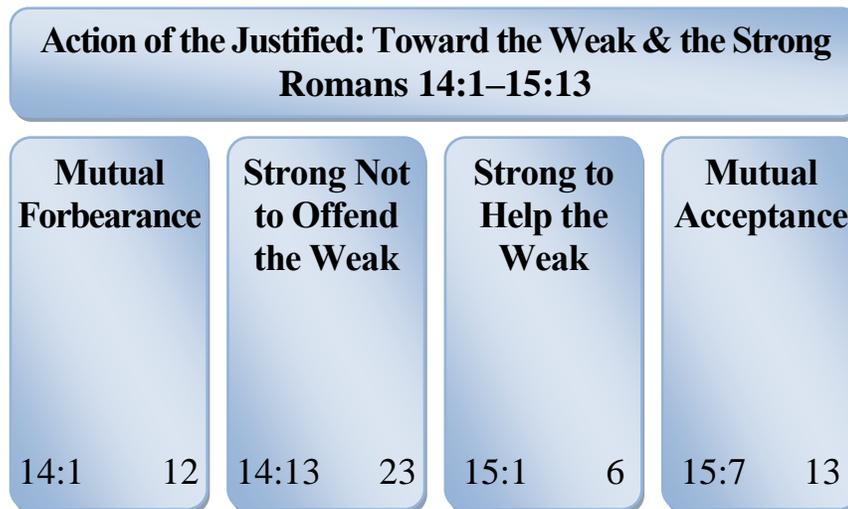
Overview/Summary

Romans 14:1-12	Mutual forbearance
Romans 14:13-23	The strong are not to offend the weak
Romans 15:1-6	The strong are to help the weak
Romans 15:7-13	Mutual accountability

The issues that Paul has dealt with that have cause division:

- (1) the “strong” eat all kinds of food while the “weak” eat only vegetables (14:2)
- (2) the “strong” make no distinction among days while the “weak” value some days more than others (14:5); and
- (3) the “strong” drink wine while the “weak” abstain (14:21; cf. 14:17).¹

AS THE REFERENCES to the “strong” and the “weak” in [verse 1](#) show, Paul is continuing his rebuke of the Roman Christians for their judgmental attitudes. . . Paul does not abandon the specific issue he has been talking about since [14:1](#), but he is now at the point of wrapping up his discussion with some concluding exhortations. Specifically, he encourages those who are strong to follow the example of their Lord in putting the good of others before their own ([15:1 – 4](#)) and then urges the whole community to seek a unity that will enable them effectively to praise God ([15:5 – 6](#)).²



Preview

Beginning in [14:1](#), he tackles at length one particular issue, rebuking Christians in Rome for standing in judgment over one another ([14:2, 13](#)). The community is divided into two groups, those who are “weak [in faith]” (cf. [14:1](#)) and those who are “strong [in faith]” (cf. [15:1](#)). They criticize and condemn each other, and Paul insists this judgmental attitude must give way to tolerance and mutual recognition. As he puts it succinctly in [15:7](#), “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you.”³

The apostle leads up to this climactic exhortation in three stages.

In [14:1 – 12](#), he rebukes the two groups for looking down on one another and reminds them that it is to God, not to each other, that every believer must ultimately answer.

In [14:13 – 23](#), he urges those who are strong in faith to act out of love rather than out of a selfish insistence on doing what they feel free to do.

He continues to focus mainly on the strong in [15:1 – 6](#), identifying with them and calling on them to follow Christ’s example of loving service for the good of the body.

¹ Douglas Moo, *The Epistles to the Romans*, NICNT. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) p. 827.

² Douglas J. Moo, *NIV Application Commentary, New Testament: Romans*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, © 2000.) p. 470.

³ Douglas J. Moo, *NIV Application Commentary, New Testament: Romans*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, © 2000.) p. 446.

After his summarizing demand that believers “accept one another” (15:7), Paul reinforces his exhortation by showing how God himself has intended Gentiles and Jews to form one body for the praise of his name (15:8-13).⁴

Catch Phrase / Key Phrase:

We have an obligation to please/build up our neighbors for their good.
Put others first!

Outline

I. Prologue: *Paul’s commission to preach Christ to the nations* 1:1-17

II. Doctrine: Justification—The Righteousness of God Revealed 1:18–11:36

God’s Gracious Provision of Righteousness is Acquired by Faith in Jesus Christ

III. Duties of the Justified—Righteousness of God Reflected 12:1–15:13

The Justified Believer is to Act According to His Position before God

A. Duty Toward the Assembly 12:1-21

Action of the Justified: Toward the Assembly

“Therefore” Service 12:1

1. Foundation of Conduct: Consecration 12:1-2
2. Function of Conduct: Focused on Others 12:3-21
 - a. In humility: Using God-given enablement 12:3-8
 - b. In love: Demonstrate Christian Ethics 12:9-21

B. Duty Toward the State 13:1-14

*Action of the Justified: Toward the State*⁵

1. Submission to the Government 13:1-7
2. Loving Neighbors 13:8-10
3. Proper Conduct 13:11-14

C. Duties toward the Weak and the Strong 14:1-15:13

Third, those believers whose faith is strong and who have a good grasp on their death to the Law should not be judgmental on weaker brothers (14:1–15:13). Neither the weak nor strong brother should condemn the other, but instead should recognize the freedom that all have in Christ (14:1-12). But his freedom should not become a stumbling block to the weak: liberty must give way to love (14:13-23). That is to say, one believer’s freedoms should not cause another brother to sin by the latter’s imbibing in something against his conscience (14:23). Ultimately, the strong believer (as well as the weak) should imitate Christ in his selflessness (15:1-13), rather than using liberty as a means to please oneself.⁶

1. Mutual forbearance 14:1-12
 - a. Introduction—The Issue: Judging others 14:1-3
 - b. Each believer answers to the Lord alone 14:4-9
 - c. God is the only right Judge over believers 14:10-12
2. Exhortation for the strong not to offend the weak 14:13-23
 - a. Principle stated: do not cause offense 14:13
 - b. Practice stated: be concerned for the weak 14:14-21
 - c. Principle summarized: act in faith 14:22-23
3. Exhortation for the strong to help the weak 15:1-6
 - a. Obligation of the strong toward the weak 15:1-4
 - b. Petition for unity 15:5-6
4. Exhortation to mutual acceptance 15:7-13
 - a. Exhortation to acceptance 15:7a
 - b. Example of acceptance 15:7b-2
 - c. Entreaty of joy and peace 15:13

⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *NIV Application Commentary, New Testament: Romans*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, © 2000.) p. 447.

⁵ Dr. Harold W. Hoehner’s outline (DTS, Spring 1991, Exegesis of Romans 206, unpublished class notes)

⁶ Daniel B. Wallace, *Romans: Introduction, Argument, and Outline*, bible.org

Exposition / Key Exegetical Issues to be Aware



12—16 “Therefore”

Moving from the more doctrinal to the more practical—keeping the practical anchored in the doctrinal and making sure the doctrinal is practical.

12:9–15:12

How do you live in the Body—accepting one-another’s differences while maintaining unity?
How do you live in the world—accepting the reality of rules?

15:1-13

Christ’s example—our motivation for maintaining harmony

15:1-6 Strong are to help the weak

Interaction/Question

Looking back over chapters 12-14, what is the hardest part of accepting those who differ from us?

Would you say you are “strong” or “weak” in faith? Why?
How do you know if you are “strong?”

How does this passage provide the motivation and the result of unity in the Body?

What is the motivation for unity and acceptance of those who differ?
What is the result of unity and accepting those who differ?

Paul contrasts the concept of “pleasing yourself” and “pleasing others” for “their good.” How else could you state the idea of “pleasing others for their good?”

Love

Love does not look to one’s own interests but to the interest of others.

Love seeks what is best for someone—even if it is difficult.

15:1-2

Although Paul has indicated his agreement with the thinking of the strong group in Rome (14:14, 20), he now for the first time explicitly identifies with them, using the first person plural to include himself within the scope of his exhortation. He labels himself and the others who share his view as the *dynatoi* (lit., the powerful or able ones), that is, those who are “able” to see that their faith allows them to eat meat, drink wine, and so forth. The others are the *adynatoi*, believers who are “unable” to come to grips with this truth.⁷

The strong are capable of understanding their Christian freedoms, the weak are incapable.

“obligated”

In urging the *dynatoi* to “bear with the failings of the weak,” Paul is not asking them simply to “put up with” those who differ from them. The verb “bear” (*bastazo*) has the same force here that it does in Galatians 6:2, where Paul exhorts believers to “bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” (pers. trans.).⁸

“bearing with the failings of the weak” or “bear the weaknesses of those without strength”

Willingly and lovingly put up with the conscience of the weak.

⁷ Douglas J. Moo, *NIV Application Commentary, New Testament: Romans*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, © 2000.) p. 470.

⁸ Douglas J. Moo, *NIV Application Commentary, New Testament: Romans*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, © 2000.) p. 471.

This does not necessarily mean that the “strong” are to adopt the scruples of the “weak.” But what it means does mean is that they are sympathetically to “enter into” their attitudes, refrain from criticizing and judging them, and do what love would require towards them.⁹

So this exhortation then is not:

Ignoring the issues

Passively avoiding the use of “Christian freedoms” while others watch

But actively seeking to do what love would demand—that which is best for others.

“not to please ourselves”

Don’t use Christian liberty as an excuse for selfishness

“upbuilding” or edification

Same as 14:19

for his good, to build him up.

The two purpose clauses mutually interpret one another. It is appropriate to please others **insofar as it helps them advance in goodness**, that is, be built up and strengthened in their faith and godliness.¹⁰

The “each of us” could indicate that Paul expands his instruction from speaking to the strong only, to now including the weak as well. The instruction is appropriate for all, but it may be the primary responsibility of the strong. They are the ones who are to reach out to their “neighbor.” The inclusion of both groups into the exhortation is clear when we get to verses 5-6 and 7.

The “neighbor” would tie this back to the command to love your neighbor as yourself (13:9).

15:3-4

Interaction/Question

Focus on hope

Why does hope become the focal point?

In the midst of giving up one’s rights for a long time (endurance) there must be a positive motivation.

In case the “strong” feel they might be giving “more than their fair share” Paul reminds them that Christ is the primary example. He is the model to follow.

“hope”

Needed when facing suffering—as exemplified by Christ

Hope empowers endurance and encouragement

The appeal to “hope” begins the transitions to 15:7-13 here he will remind the strong Gentiles that they have hope because of the Jews.

Verse 4 contains a principle of great significance for the twentieth-century believer. Everything that was written in Scripture in days gone by was written for us. Not only did it serve the needs of its own day but it is still relevant in the modern world. Scripture is relevant because it speaks to our deepest needs.¹³⁹ It is through the endurance taught in Scripture¹⁴⁰ and the encouragement it brings that we are enabled to live in hope. Morris reminds us that “Paul is not exhorting believers to pull themselves

⁹ Douglas Moo, *The Epistles to the Romans*, NICNT. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) p. 866.

¹⁰ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker exegetical commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998), 746.

¹³⁹ The contemporaneity of Scripture is seen in verses such as 1 Cor 10:11 (“These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come”), and Rom 4:23–24 (“The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead”).

¹⁴⁰ Many writers hold that the two *διὰ* clauses are independent and that *τῶν γραφῶν* modifies only *τῆς παρακλήσεως*.

together and manifest these qualities, but rejoicing in God who gives them” (cf. v. 5).¹⁴¹ The difficulties of today are bearable because God in his Word tells us of a better time yet to come. He mediates his comfort and encouragement by speaking through his Word to the hearts of receptive believers. To separate oneself from Scripture is to turn a deaf ear to the voice of a Heavenly Father anxious to console.¹¹

5:5-6

The nature of corporate worship
Unity is required for God to receive glory

Paul’s prayer serves as an exhortation.

The prayer is that God will provide the endurance and encouragement they need to pursue harmony that will yield worship to God.

“harmony with one-another”

“be one minded” “thinking the same thing among one another”

Philippians 2:2-4 complete my joy by being of **the same mind**, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (ESV)

Now he is clearly addressing the whole body.

He prays specifically that God himself will grant to the community the ability “to think the same way” (lit. trans.; NIV “spirit of unity”). In light of his insistence that the weak not change their minds until their own faith leads them to do so (14:23), it is unlikely that Paul is praying here that all the Roman believers will come to the same opinion on the matters at issue. Rather, he is praying that they may possess a unity of purpose that transcends these differences.¹²

One another in Rom 14:1-15:13

Do not judge 14:13
Pursue... peace and edification 14:19
Think the same thing 15:5
Welcome 15:7

This is quite the prayer and challenge—having the same mind, maintaining harmony even when individuals disagree. It seems to go beyond, “agreeing to disagree” and into a self-sacrificing other-centeredness.

Notes that without unity, without being of “one voice”—there won’t be corporate worship.

The experience of Christian unity produces a symphony of praise to God in which each voice blends with all the others to the glory of God. It is a family affair. We, the adopted sons of God, sing praises to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹³

Supporting passages

Ephesians 4:1-5:21

Ephesians 4:1-3 I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (ESV)

¹⁴¹ Morris, *Romans*, 501.

¹¹ Robert H. Mounce, vol. 27, *Romans*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1995), 260.

¹² Douglas J. Moo, *NIV Application Commentary, New Testament: Romans*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, © 2000.) p. 472.

¹³ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, electronic ed., Logos (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1995) p. 260.

Philippians 2:1-11
Colossians 3:12-17

- **Summary of Key Issue:** In issues over differing opinions--
Seek to please others for their good, their edification (15:2)
Seek unity—one mind, one accord, and with one voice for the glory of God (15:5-6)

Principle:

Be concerned for the weak, not just your own rights (15:1)
Put others first.

15:7-13 Mutual Accountability

...some scholars contend that 15:8–13 (or 15:7–13) does not function as the conclusion of 14:1–15:6 but serves as the conclusion of the entire letter or of the parenetic section (12:1–15:6) (Ziesler 1989: 325–26, 336–37; G. Sass 1993; Heil 1994: 243–44). But an either-or answer should not be adopted in construing the function of 15:7–13. On the one hand, these verses do function as the conclusion to 14:1–15:6. This is signaled by the inferential particle *διό* (*dio*, therefore), which draws the conclusion from the entire preceding argument (14:1–15:6), and by the verb *προσλαμβάνεσθε* (*proslambanesthe*, receive) in 15:7, which harks back to the same verb in 14:1, indicating an *inclusio* between 14:1 and 15:7. Another connection between 14:1–15:6 and 15:7–13 is the theme of the inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles in the people of God. If the strong and weak represent primarily Gentiles and Jews, respectively, then 15:7–13 ties together this section by emphasizing that the inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles into the church fulfills God's promises.

On the other hand, one cannot deny that 15:7–13 also serves as the climax of the letter as a whole, for the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in God's saving purposes has dominated the entire letter. The practical advice given to the divided community in 14:1–15:6 does not occur in a vacuum, for Paul has elaborated in some detail the main lineaments of his theology in chapters 1–13, especially emphasizing throughout the implications for Jews and Gentiles. Romans 15:7–13, then, concludes his advice to the strong and the weak, who are divided over foods and the observance of days. It also embraces the whole of Romans theologically since the scriptural underpinnings of Paul's pastoral advice in 14:1–15:6 are explained. The relationship between the strong and the weak is not merely a practical debate of little consequence. The resolution of this division is crucial, for it relates to God's saving purposes and promises. Indeed, in 15:7–13 the theological center of Romans emerges once again. For the driving force of Paul's ministry was not the inclusion of the Gentiles and the folding in of the Jews into the people of God, although these were crucial to him. The reason for the salvation of the Gentiles and the Jews was so that God would be glorified (v. 9). The same idea is expressed in verses 9 and 11. Gentiles have been included so that they will praise God along with the Jews. Glorifying God and praising him are two different ways of expressing the same idea. Paul's passion for the Gentile mission, as we saw in 1:5, was motivated by a desire to bring glory to Jesus' name. The recurrence of that theme here, along with the emphasis on the fulfillment of God's saving promises in the Scriptures, demonstrates that 15:7–13 not only functions as the conclusion to 14:1–15:6 but also draws attention to the major theme (the glory and praise of God) of the entire letter.¹⁴

15:7

This is the main point: “welcome one another” –include, accept, to receive into ones house
The similarity between 15:7a and 14:1 seems to point to this section (15:7-13) serving as the conclusion—“therefore.”

The final phrase, “to the glory of God,” is a **statement of purpose**: “in order that God might be glorified.” The difficulty is to decide whether this is the purpose of the believers' receiving each other or of Christ's receiving us. Perhaps, since the former is the leading idea, and since Paul has already drawn a connection between unity and the glorifying of God (v. 6), we should attach the phrase to the initial imperative, “receive one another.”¹⁵

Or

¹⁴Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998), 703.

¹⁵Douglas Moo, *The Epistles to the Romans*, NICNT. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) p. 875.

The phrase “for the glory of God” (εἰς δόξαν τοῦ θεοῦ, *eis doxan tou theou*) in verse 7 could be attached to the main exhortation “accept one another” or to the subordinate clause “Christ accepted you.”³ We should avoid an either-or here, for the intention is to say that believers should accept one another for the glory of God just as Christ accepted you for God’s glory (Calvin 1960: 306). The conjunction “just as” (καθώς, *kathōs*) is causal here (Cranfield 1979: 739; Käsemann 1980: 385; Moo 1996: 875), denoting the reason why believers should accept one another. Mutual acceptance is not exhorted because other members of the church are naturally pleasing or attractive. Paul returns to the fundamental baseline of the gospel. Believers should accept one another because Christ accepted us, despite our hostility to him, in order to bring glory to God. Since Christ accepted us, despite our weakness and sin (5:6–10), then we too should accept one another.¹⁶

15:8-12

The basis for “welcoming” or receiving each other:

Christ welcomed them 15:7b

Christ has acted to bring God’s blessing on both Jew and Gentile 15:8-9a

Fulfillment of Scripture 15:9b-12

15:13

Interaction:

If we don’t have hope—what does this passage challenge us to do?

Believe



Talk about it

The prayer was that God would fill the believers at Rome with all joy and peace.¹⁵¹ Note, however, that it was “as you trust in him.”¹⁵² While it is God who provides the joy and peace, it is our continuing confidence and trust in God that enables him to bless us as he does. The joy and peace given by God results in an overflow of hope in the life of the believer. Our role is to maintain a relationship of continuing trust in God. Everything else is in his hands, and he never fails. Our experience of overflowing hope is made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵³ Clearly, the Christian life is God’s empowering presence in the midst of life’s uncertainties. It is not up to us to conjure up hope or any other spiritual quality. Our only access to empowerment is to believe. Then God steps in and does the rest. The Christian life is a supernatural life in the fullest sense of that term: “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:27; cf. Phil 1:21).¹⁷

→ **Summary of Key Issue:** In issues over differing opinions

Christ was a servant for the glory of God, so should all Christians be with each other

Principle:

Accept one another (in spite of differences) to the glory of God (15:7)

Put others first

Key Points

Be concerned for the weak, not just your own rights (15:1)

Accept one another (in spite of differences) to the glory of God (15:7)

Implications/Application

³ For the former see Cranfield 1979: 739–40; Wilckens 1982: 105; Keck 1990a: 89; Stuhlmacher 1994: 232; Moo 1996: 875. For the latter see Sanday and Headlam 1902: 397; Barrett 1991: 248; Murray 1965: 204; Dunn 1988b: 846; Fitzmyer 1993c: 706. Barrett and Dunn, however, suggest that both may be in view.

¹⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998), 754.

¹⁵¹ Luther comments that “the apostle places joy first and then peace, because it is joy that gives peace to men, engendering it in their hearts” (*Romans*, 198–99).

¹⁵² ἐν τῷ πιστεύειν is causal.

¹⁵³ Cranfield comments, “The existence of this hope in men is no human possibility but the creation of the Spirit of God” (*Romans*, 2:748). “There are no hopeless situations,” writes Barclay; “there are only men who have grown hopeless about them” (*Romans*, 199).

¹⁷ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, electronic ed., Logos (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1995) p. 262.

We can see that the relational challenges facing the believers in Rome and their need to not simply maintain a surface unity or simply co-exist with those who had differences—differences of background, race and customs—but their need to work out differences and work together to accomplish the needed care and commission that they and we all have as believers.

If the Body does not function correctly, the gospel is not propelled.

If the Body does not function correctly, the gospel is impeded.

If the Body does not function correctly, individuals will not grow to be what God intends.

If the Body does not function correctly, individuals will not serve each other or God the way He deserves.

Summary

Our Debt to Weaker Christians (Rom. 14:1—15:13)

“We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak” (15:1). This is a evidently a solemn obligation, but who are the “strong” and the “weak,” and how do the “strong” go about paying their debt to the “weak”?

The Christian assemblies in Rome were divided over observing special days and following special diets. It is likely that this division had national and racial origins because the Jewish believers hesitated to change their religious practices. Unlike the Gentiles, the Jewish Christians were accustomed to honor the Sabbath Day, obey the dietary laws, and celebrate the annual feasts (Lev 23). It was a difficult thing for the Jews suddenly to step out of the yoke of the law (Acts 15:10) and into the freedom of God’s grace. This is what helped to create the problem in the churches.

The “strong” Christians in Rome were those who believed God’s Word and accepted their wonderful position in Jesus Christ. They rejoiced that they were not under the law, that Jesus Christ had fully met the demands of the law, and that their standing before God was wholly by grace. These people were strong in faith and in their conscience because they believed God’s Word and acted upon it.

The “weak” Christians were saved people who had a difficult time accepting their freedom in Christ. They were still bound in mind and conscience to the traditions of their former religion. As yet, their conscience was not strong enough to make that step out of the security of law and into the liberty of grace.

Unfortunately, some of the “strong” saints despised their “weaker” brothers and sisters for not growing up. They disputed with them, hoping to argue them into a more mature Christian life. The “weak” believers condemned the “strong” ones for breaking God’s law and setting a bad example, and the “strong” believers laughed at the “weak” ones for following religious diets and celebrating holy days. It was a bad situation all around and both groups were at fault.

We have a similar situation in the church today, except that the issues are different: fashions (hair and clothes), amusements, Sunday activities, separation from the world, and, in some places, even music and translations of the Bible. The strong Christians defend their liberty, only to be told by the weaker Christians that this so-called liberty is really nothing but anarchy and apostasy.

How do you solve this problem? Certainly not by issuing a new law and insisting that everybody obey it! No matter which side you champion, you would only alienate the other side and make the division worse.

Paul solved the problem by emphasizing the lordship of Jesus Christ and the believers’ relationship to him. If Jesus is indeed the Lord of our lives, then we as individual believers ought to be able to live together in harmony, in spite of our differences.

Paul shared three simple steps for all of them to follow: (1) receive each other because Christ has received you, 14:1-12; (2) build each other up, don’t tear each other down, 14:13-23; and (3) seek to please each other as you please Christ, 15:1-7. In 15:1 Paul made it clear that it is the strong Christian who has the greater obligation. The strong saint should seek to help the weaker brother to mature in the faith so that he then becomes strong and is able to strengthen others. Their differences must not be made a test of fellowship, church membership or spirituality. Rather, their personal differences must be looked upon as opportunities for both sides to practice patient love to the glory of God.

How many useless church fights would be avoided, and church splits prevented, if only God’s people would stop majoring on the minor! We have a debt to pay to one another, to receive one another and to bear one another’s infirmities in love, including any minor differences we may have

concerning the Christian life. St. Augustine said it perfectly: "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity."¹⁸



What do we learn
About God?

He deserves our glory
He is purposeful



Act on it

We have an obligation to please/build up our neighbors for their good.

Therefore we must put others first!

We do this by loving others.

Love seeks to do what is best for others and will lead to the glory of God

Are there areas/issues over which you have had trouble accepting? How do the exhortations to acceptance, being of one mind along with example of Christ challenge you?

What do you need to do?

Is there anyone you need to talk to?

¹⁸Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be What You Are: 12 Intriguing Pictures of the Christian from the New Testament*. Wheaton IL: Tyndale House, 1996, c1988.

Appendix 1: See Conflict as an Opportunity

Philippians 2:1-11 So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, 2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (ESV)

Galatians 6

Ephesians 4—5

See Conflict as an Opportunity¹⁹

By God's grace, you can use conflict to:

- Glorify God (by trusting, obeying, and imitating him)
- Serve other people (by helping to bear their burdens or by confronting them in love)
- Grow to be like Christ (by confessing sin and turning from attitudes that promote conflict).

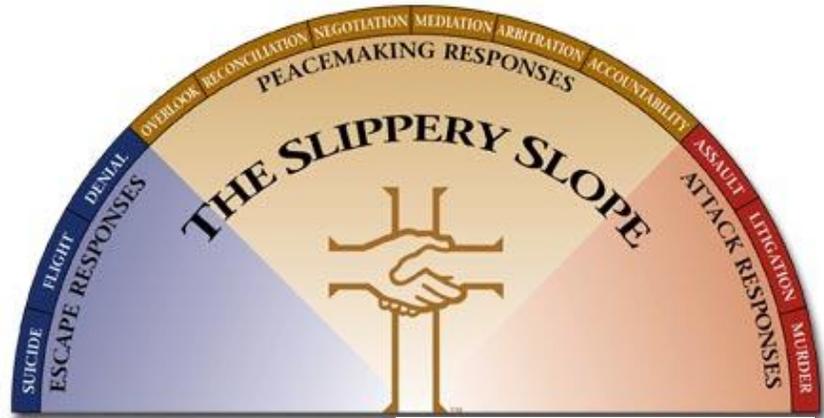
Glorify God

Ask "How can I please and honor the Lord in this situation?"

Get the log out of your own eye

When you identify ways that you have wronged another person, it is important to admit your wrongs honestly and thoroughly. One way to do this is to use the "Seven A's of Confession:"

- **A**ddress everyone involved (All those whom you affected)
- **A**void *if, but, and maybe* (Do not try to excuse your wrongs)
- **A**dmit specifically (Both attitudes and actions)
- **A**cknowledge the hurt (Express sorrow for hurting someone)
- **A**cept the consequences (Such as making restitution)
- **A**lter your behavior (Change your attitudes and actions)
- **A**sk for forgiveness (and allow for time)



From *The Peacemaker* by Ken Sande

Gently Restore

Go and be reconciled

"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col. 3:12-14; see also 1 Cor. 13:5; Psalm 103:12; Is. 43:25). One way to imitate God's forgiveness is to make four specific promises when you forgive someone:

- I will not think about this incident.
- I will not bring this incident up and use it against you.
- I will not talk to others about this incident.
- I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.

¹⁹ This material taken from Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Baker Books, Updated ed. 2003)

THE PROBLEM

PEACEMAKING IN THE CHURCH

Conflict in the Church

Where two or three come together in Jesus' name... there will eventually be conflict.

A church is as susceptible to conflict as any other human organization. No matter how much you and others in your church want to serve God and advance his kingdom, all of you are still affected by the Fall, which means you will inevitably experience conflict.

Conflict in the church can take many forms. Low-key gossip and slander can slowly poison an entire congregation. Unresolved tensions between pastors, elders, and deacons can destroy cooperation and rob a church of effective leadership. Prolonged family conflicts can lead to rebellious children or bitter divorce. Deadlocks on church committees can cripple needed ministries. Disputes between members who do business with one another can lead to consuming lawsuits.

Any time a conflict between two people in a church is not properly resolved, it can grow to infect an entire congregation. Such conflicts are often more intense and destructive than those in secular organizations. Whenever people take positions based on religious beliefs, they often succumb to self-righteousness and begin to judge others' motives. Thinking that they alone are defending biblical truth, they label all opposing views as unbiblical, sinful, and even "of the enemy."

Of course, some disputes in the church involve non-negotiable issues of doctrine or obedience to the Word of God. But all too often Christians foolishly magnify minor theological differences or matters of personal conviction or expediency, which can unnecessarily polarize an entire congregation.

This black-and-white thinking tends to magnify differences, harden positions, and make confession, compromise, and reconciliation extremely difficult. Thus, church conflicts often lead to "win-lose" results, with the more powerful side proudly coming out on top and the weaker side being forced into a resentful submission or angry exit.

Such conduct in the church clashes head-on with Jesus' passionate prayer to the Father for his church: "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:23). Instead of letting all people know we are Jesus' disciples by our love for one another (John 13:35), we give the world more and more excuses to label Christians as hypocrites and dismiss our contradictory witness to a God of grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

You cannot prevent conflict in the church. In fact, God may bring conflict to the corporate life of the church in order to encourage change and spur spiritual growth. How Christians respond to this conflict, however, determines whether it has been prevented from developing further or allowed to progress into destructive sin. Conflicts will come. Will your church be prepared to respond?

Preparing the church for conflict means being deliberate about the preparation process -- truly cultivating a "Culture of Peace™" in advance of the conflict. Romans 14:19 says, "Let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another" (NKJV). The church must pursue conflict preparation as it would any other ministry of the church. This involves teaching God's Word, providing training in reconciliation skills and principles, and, most importantly, making a commitment to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3 NIV).

Whether you are a senior pastor or a new member, there are many ways to help your church learn how to respond to conflict biblically, and thus improve its evangelistic witness and ability to minister. Read the [Culture of Peace™](#) section for specific ideas and steps to transform your church into a peacemaking church.



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Romans 13:1-14

- 1 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.
For there is no authority except from God,
and those that exist have been instituted by God.
- 2 Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed,
and those who resist will incur judgment.
- 3 For rulers are not a terror to good conduct,
but to bad.
Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority?
Then do what is good,
and you will receive his approval,
for he is God's servant for your good.
- 4 But if you do wrong,
be afraid,
for he does not bear the sword in vain.
For he is the servant of God,
an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.
- 5 Therefore one must be in subjection,
not only to avoid God's wrath
but also for the sake of conscience.
- 6 For because of this you also pay taxes,
for the authorities are ministers of God,
attending to this very thing.
- 7 Pay to all what is owed to them:
taxes to whom taxes are owed,
revenue to whom revenue is owed,
respect to whom respect is owed,
honor to whom honor is owed.

**Action of the Justified: Toward the Weak & the Strong
Romans 14:1–15:13**

**Mutual
Forbearance**

14:1 12

**Strong Not
to Offend
the Weak**

14:13 23

**Strong to
Help the
Weak**

15:1 6

**Mutual
Acceptance**

15:7 13

Wouldn't it be wonderful if people could simply renounce their bad habits and decide to respond to conflict in a gracious and constructive way? But it is not that easy. In order to break free from the pattern they have fallen into, they need to understand why they react to conflict the way they do.

Jesus provides us with clear guidance on this issue. During His earthly ministry, a young man approached the Lord and asked Him to settle an inheritance dispute with his brother. "Jesus replied, 'Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?' Then he said to them, 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions'" (Luke 12:13-15).

This passage reveals a common human pattern. When faced with conflict, we tend to focus passionately on what our opponent has done wrong or should do to make things right. In contrast, God always calls us to focus on what is going on in our own hearts when we are at odds with others. Why? Because our heart is the wellspring of all our thoughts, words, and actions, and therefore the source of our conflicts. "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander" (Matthew 15:19).

The heart's central role in conflict is vividly described in James 4:1-3. If you understand this passage, you will have found a key to preventing and resolving conflict.

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

This passage describes the root cause of destructive conflict: Conflicts arise from unmet desires in our hearts. When we feel we cannot be satisfied unless we have something we want or think we need, the desire turns into a demand. If someone fails to meet that desire, we condemn him in our heart and quarrel and fight to get our way. In short, conflict arises when desires grow into demands and we judge and punish those who get in our way. Let us look at this progression one step at a time.

The Progression of an Idol¹

I Desire

Conflict always begins with some kind of desire. Some desires are inherently wrong, such as vengeance, lust, or greed. But many desires are not wrong in and of themselves. For example, there is nothing innately wrong about desiring things like peace and quiet, a clean home, a new computer, professional success, an intimate relationship with your spouse, or respectful children.

If a good desire, such as wanting an intimate relationship with your spouse, is not being met, it is perfectly legitimate to talk about it with your spouse. As you talk, you may discover ways that both of you can help to fulfill each other in mutually beneficial ways. If not, it may be appropriate to seek help from your pastor or a Christian counselor who can assist you in understanding your differences and strengthening your marriage.

But what if your spouse persistently fails to meet a particular desire and is unwilling to discuss it further with you or anyone else? This is where you stand at a crossroad. On the one hand, you can trust God and seek your fulfillment in Him (Psalm 73:25). You can ask Him to help you to continue to grow and mature no matter what your spouse does (James 1:2-4). And you can continue to love your spouse and pray for God's sanctifying work in his or her life (1 John 4:19-21; Luke 6:27-28). If you follow this course, God promises to bless you and use your difficult situation to conform you to the likeness of Christ (Romans 8:28-29).

On the other hand, you can dwell on your disappointment and allow it to control your life. At the very least, this will result in self-pity and bitterness toward your spouse. At worst, it can destroy your marriage. Let us look at how this downward spiral evolves.

I Demand

Unmet desires have the potential of working themselves deeper and deeper into our hearts. This is especially true when we come to see a desire as something we need or deserve, and therefore must have in order to be happy or fulfilled. There are many ways to justify or legitimize a desire.

- "I work hard all week. Don't I deserve a little peace and quiet when I come home?"
- "I worked two jobs to put you through school; I deserve your respect and appreciation."

The Progression of an Idol

...Desire
...Demand
...Judge
...Punish

- "I spend hours managing the family budget; I really need a new computer."
- "The Bible says we should save up to cover unexpected problems; we need to tighten our budget so we can put more into savings."
- "God has given me a gift for developing new businesses, and He calls me to work hard to support our family. I deserve to have more of your support."
- "Scripture says a husband and wife should be completely united in love. I need to have more intimacy with you."
- "I only want what God commands: children who have learned to respect their parents and use their God-given gifts to the fullest."

There is an element of validity in each of these statements. The trouble is that if our desire is not met, these attitudes can lead to a vicious cycle. The more we want something, the more we think of it as something we need and deserve. And the more we think we are entitled to it, the more convinced we are that we cannot be happy and secure without it.

When we see our object of desire as being essential to our fulfillment and well-being, it moves from being a desire to a demand. "I wish I could have this" evolves into "I must have this!" This is where trouble sets in. Even if the initial desire was not inherently wrong, it has grown so strong that it begins to control our thoughts and behavior. In biblical terms, it has become an "idol."

Most of us think of an idol as a statue of wood, stone, or metal worshiped by pagan people. But the concept is much broader and far more personal than that. An idol is anything apart from God that we depend on to be happy, fulfilled, or secure. In biblical terms it is something other than God that we set our heart on (Luke 12:29), that motivates us (1 Corinthians 4:5), that masters and rules us (Psalm 119:133; Ephesians 5:5), or that we trust, fear, or serve (Isaiah 42:17; Matthew 6:24; Luke 12:4-5). In short, it is something we love and pursue in place of God (see Philippians 3:19).

Given its controlling effect on our lives, an idol can also be referred to as a "false god" or a "functional god." As Martin Luther wrote, "To whatever we look for any good thing and for refuge in every need, that is what is meant by 'god.' To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in him from the heart.... To whatever you give your heart and entrust your being, that, I say, is really your god."²

Even sincere Christians struggle with idolatry. We may believe in God and say we want to serve Him only, but at times we allow other influences to rule us. In this sense we are no different from the ancient Israelites: "Even while these people were worshiping the LORD, they were serving their idols. To this day their children and grandchildren continue to do as their fathers did" (2 Kings 17:41).

It is important to emphasize the fact that idols can arise from good desires as well as wicked desires. It is often not what we want that is the problem, but that we want it too much. For example, it is not unreasonable for a man to want a passionate sexual relationship with his wife, or for a wife to want open and honest communication with her husband, or for either of them to want a steadily growing savings account. These are good desires, but if they turn into demands that must be met in order for either spouse to be satisfied and fulfilled, they result in bitterness, resentment, or self-pity that can destroy a marriage.

How can you discern when a good desire might be turning into a sinful demand? You can begin by prayerfully asking yourself "X-ray" questions that reveal the true condition of your heart.

- What am I preoccupied with? What is the first thing on my mind in the morning and the last thing on my mind at night?
- How would I complete this statement: "If only _____, then I would be happy, fulfilled, and secure"?
- What do I want to preserve or avoid?
- Where do I put my trust?
- What do I fear?
- When a certain desire is not met, do I feel frustration, anxiety, resentment, bitterness, anger, or depression?
- Is there something I desire so much that I am willing to disappoint or hurt others in order to have it?

As you search your heart for idols, you will often encounter multiple layers of concealment, disguise, and justification. As mentioned earlier, one of the most subtle cloaking devices is to argue that we want only what God Himself commands.

For example, a mother may desire that her children be respectful and obedient to her, kind to one another, and diligent in developing their gifts and talents. And she can back up each goal with a specific scripture that shows that God Himself desires such behavior.

When they do not fulfill these goals, even after her repeated encouragement or correction, she may feel frustrated, angry, or resentful. She needs to ask, "Why am I feeling this way? Is it a righteous anger that they are

not living up to God's standards? Or is it a selfish anger that they are not giving me the smooth, comfortable, and convenient day I want?"

In most cases, it will be a mixture of both. Part of her truly wants to see her children love and obey God in every way, both for His glory and for their good. But another part of her is motivated by a desire for her own comfort and convenience. Which desire is really controlling her heart and reactions?

If the God-centered desire is dominating the mother's heart, her response to disobedient children should be characterized by God's discipline toward her. "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love" (Psalm 103:8). As she imitates God, her response will line up with corrective guidelines found in Galatians 6:1: "If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted." In other words, although her discipline may be direct and firm, it will be wrapped in gentleness and love, and leave no residue of resentment or unforgiveness.

On the other hand, if her desire for comfort and convenience has become an idol, her reaction to her children will be much different. It will be characterized by smoldering anger as well as harsh and unnecessarily hurtful words or discipline. She may feel bitterness or resentment that her desires have been frustrated. And even after disciplining her children, she may maintain a lingering coolness toward them that extends their punishment and warns them not to cross her again. If this latter group of attitudes and actions frequently characterizes her response, it is a sign that her desire for godly children has probably evolved into an idolatrous demand.

I Judge

Another sign of idolatry is the inclination to judge other people. When they fail to satisfy our desires and live up to our expectations, we criticize and condemn in our hearts if not with our words. As Dave Powlison writes:

We judge others—criticize, nit-pick, nag, attack, condemn— because we literally play God. This is heinous. [The Bible says]"There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you to judge your neighbor?" Who are you when you judge? None other than a God wannabe. In this, we become like the Devil himself (no surprise that the Devil is mentioned in James 3:15 and 4:7). We act exactly like the adversary who seeks to usurp God's throne and who acts as the accuser of the brethren. When you and I fight, our minds become filled with accusations: your wrongs and my rights preoccupy me. We play the self-righteous judge in the mini-kingdoms we establish.³

This insight should leave us shaking in our boots! When we judge others and condemn them in our hearts for not meeting our desires, we are imitating the Devil (see James 3:15; 4:7). We have doubled our idolatry problem: Not only have we let an idolatrous desire rule our hearts, but we have also set ourselves up as judging minigods. This is a formula for excruciating conflict.

This is not to say that it is inherently wrong to evaluate or even judge others within certain limits. Scripture teaches that we should observe and evaluate others' behavior so that we can respond and minister to them in appropriate ways, which may even involve loving confrontation (see Matthew 7:1-5; 18:15; Galatians 6:1).

We cross the line, however, when we begin to sinfully judge others, which is characterized by a feeling of superiority, indignation, condemnation, bitterness, or resentment. Sinful judging often involves speculating on others' motives. Most of all, it reveals the absence of a genuine love and concern toward them. When these attitudes are present, our judging has crossed the line and we are playing God.

The closer we are to others, the more we expect of them and the more likely we are to judge them when they fail to meet our expectations. For example, we may look at our spouse and think, "If you really love me, you above all people will help meet this need." We think of our children and say, "After all I've done for you, you owe this to me."

We can place similar expectations on relatives, close friends, or members of our church. Expectations are not inherently bad. It is good to hope for the best in others and reasonable to anticipate receiving understanding and support from those who are closest to us.

But if we are not careful, these expectations can become conditions and standards that we use to judge others. Instead of giving people room for independence, disagreement, or failure, we rigidly impose our expectations on them. In effect, we expect them to give allegiance to our idols. When they refuse to do so, we condemn them in our hearts and with our words, and our conflicts with them take on a heightened intensity.

I Punish

Idols always demand sacrifices. When others fail to satisfy our demands and expectations, our idols demand that they should suffer. Whether deliberately or unconsciously, we will find ways to hurt or punish people so they will give in to our desires.

This punishment can take many forms. Sometimes we react in overt anger, lashing out with hurtful words to inflict pain on those who fail to meet our expectations. When we do so, we are essentially placing others on the altar of

our idol and sacrificing them, not with a pagan knife, but with the sharp edge of our tongue. Only when they give in to our desire and give us what we want will we stop inflicting pain upon them.

But we punish those who don't bow to our idols in numerous other ways as well. Our children may use pouting, stomping, or dirty looks to hurt us for not meeting their desires. Adults and children alike may impose guilt or shame on others by walking around with pained or crushed looks on their faces. Some people even resort to physical violence or sexual abuse to punish and control others.

As we grow in faith and awareness of our sin, most of us recognize and reject overt and obviously sinful means of punishing others. But our idols do not give up their influence easily, and they often lead us to develop more subtle means of punishing those who do not serve them.

Withdrawal from a relationship is a common way to hurt others. This may include a subtle coolness toward the other person, withholding affection or physical contact, being sad or gloomy, refusing to look someone in the eye, or even abandoning the relationship altogether.

Sending subtle, unpleasant cues over a long period of time is an age-old method of inflicting punishment. For example, a friend of mine mentioned to me that his wife was not pleased with the fact that he was giving so much time to a particular ministry. He closed by saying, "And as we all know, when momma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy!" He laughed as he said it, but his comment made me think of the proverb, "A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping on a rainy day" (Proverbs 27:15). A woman has a unique ability to set the tone in a home. If she is not careful, she can pervert that gift and use it to create an unpleasant or uncomfortable atmosphere that tells her family, "Either get in line with what I want, or you will suffer." Such behavior is an act of unbelief: Instead of relying on God's means of grace to sanctify her family, she depends on her own tools of punishment to manipulate them into change. Of course, a man can do the same thing; by being perpetually critical and unhappy, he too can make everyone in the family miserable until they give in to his idols. The usual result of such behavior is a superficial, splintered family.

Inflicting pain on others is one of the surest signs that an idol is ruling our hearts (see James 4:1-3). When we catch ourselves punishing others in any way, whether deliberately and overtly or unconsciously and subtly, it is a warning that something other than God is ruling our hearts.

The Cure for an Idolatrous Heart

An idol, as we have seen, is any desire that has grown into a consuming demand that rules our heart; it is something we think we must have to be happy, fulfilled, or secure. To put it another way, it is something we love, fear, or trust.

Love, fear, trust—these are words of worship! Jesus commands us to love God, fear God, and trust God and God alone (Matthew 22:37; Luke 12:4-5; John 14:1). Any time we long for something apart from God, fear something more than God, or trust in something other than God to make us happy, fulfilled, or secure, we are engaging in the worship of false gods. As a result, we deserve the judgment and wrath of the true God.

Deliverance from Judgment

There is only one way out of this bondage and judgment: It is to look to God Himself, who loves to deliver people from their idols. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2-3).

God has provided the cure for our idolatry by sending His Son to experience the punishment that we deserve because of our sin. Through Jesus Christ we can become righteous in God's sight and find freedom from sin and idolatry. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:1-2).

To receive this forgiveness and freedom, we must acknowledge our sin, repent of it, and put our trust in Jesus Christ (see Acts 3:19; Psalm 32:5). When we do, we are no longer under God's judgment. Instead, He brings us into His family, makes us His children and heirs, and enables us to live a godly life (Galatians 4:4-7). This is the good news of the gospel—forgiveness and eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Deliverance from Specific Idols

Yet there is more good news. God wants to deliver us not only from our general problem with sin and idolatry, but also from the specific, day-to-day idols that consume us, control us, and cause conflict with those around us.

This deliverance is not done in blanket fashion, with all our idols being swept away in one great spiritual experience. Instead, God calls us to identify and confess our idols one by one, and then to cooperate with Him as He steadily removes them bit by bit from our hearts.

God conveys His grace to help us in this identification and deliverance process via three vehicles: His Bible, His Spirit, and His church. The Bible is "living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). As

you diligently study and meditate on the Bible and sit under regular, sound preaching, God will use His Word like a spotlight and a scalpel in your heart. It will reveal your idolatrous desires and show you how to love and worship God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.

The Holy Spirit aids our deliverance from idols by helping us to understand the Bible, to identify our sin, and to pursue a godly life (1 Corinthians 2:10-15; Philippians 2:13). Therefore, we should pray on a daily basis for the Spirit to guide, convict, and strengthen us in our walk with Christ.

Finally, God has surrounded us with brothers and sisters in Christ who can teach us, lovingly confront us about our idols, and provide encouragement and guidance in our spiritual growth (Galatians 6:1; Romans 15:14). This requires that we commit ourselves to consistent involvement in a solid, biblical church and seek regular fellowship and accountability from spiritually mature believers.

Through these three vehicles of grace, God will help you examine your life and progressively expose and deliver you from the idols that rule your heart. This process involves several key steps.

- Prayerfully ask yourself the "X-ray" questions listed previously, which will help you discern the desires that have come to rule your heart.
- Keep track of your discoveries in a journal so that you can identify patterns and steadily go after specific idols.
- Pray daily that God would rob your idols of their influence in your life by making you miserable whenever you give in to them.
- Describe your idols to your spouse and an accountability partner, and ask them to pray for you and lovingly confront you when they see signs that the idol is still controlling you.
- Realize that idols are masters of change and disguise. As soon as you gain a victory over a particular sinful desire, your idol is likely to reappear in a related form, with a redirected desire and more subtle means of attracting your attention.
- If you are dealing with an idol that is difficult to identify or conquer, go to your pastor or some other spiritually mature advisor, and seek his or her counsel and support.
- Most of all, ask God to replace your idols with a growing love for Him and a consuming desire to worship Him and Him alone (more on this below).

If someone told you that you had a deadly cancer that would take your life if you did not get treatment, you would probably spare no effort or expense in pursuing the most rigorous treatment available. Well, you do have cancer, a cancer of the soul. It is called sin and idolatry. But there is a cure. It is called the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is administered through the Word, the Spirit, and the church. The more rigorously you avail yourself of these means of grace, the greater effect they will have in delivering you from the idols that plague your soul.

Replace Idol Worship with Worship of the True God

In his excellent book *Future Grace*, John Piper teaches that "sin is what you do when you are not fully satisfied in God."⁴ The same may be said about idolatry: It is what we do when we are not fully satisfied in God. In other words, if we are not fulfilled and secure in God, we will inevitably seek other sources of happiness and security.

Therefore, if you want to squeeze the idols out of your heart and leave no room for them to return, make it your top priority to aggressively pursue an all-consuming worship for the living God. Ask Him to teach you how to love, fear, and trust Him more than anything in this world. Replacing idol worship with worship of the true God involves several steps:

- **Repent before God.** When we repent and confess our sins and idols, believing in our forgiveness through Christ, we also confess our faith in Christ. Repentance and confession of our faith in the true God is true worship (1 John 1:8-10). "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:17; see also Isaiah 66:2b).
- **Fear God.** Stand in awe of the true God when you are tempted to fear others or are afraid of losing something precious. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of [all wisdom]" (Proverbs 1:7). "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). "If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared" (Psalm 130:3-4).
- **Love God.** Desire the One who forgives us and provides everything we need instead of looking to other things that cannot save you. "Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind' " (Matthew 22:37). "Those who seek the LORD lack no good thing" (Psalm 34:10). "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Psalm 73:25-26).
- **Trust God.** Rely on the One who sacrificed His Son for you and has proven Himself to be absolutely dependable in every situation. "It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man" (Psalm 118:8). "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5). "His

divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Peter 1:3-4).

- **Delight in God.** Find your greatest joy in thinking about God, meditating on His works, talking to others about Him, praising Him, and giving Him thanks. "Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4). "My mouth is filled with your praise, declaring your splendor all day long" (Psalm 71:8). "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4). "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

As these passages indicate, God has designed a wonderful cycle for those who want to worship Him above all things. As you love, praise, give thanks, and delight yourself in God, He will fulfill your desires with the best thing in the world: more of Himself! And as you learn to delight more and more in Him, you will feel less need to find happiness, fulfillment, and security in the things of this world. By God's grace, the influence of idolatry and conflict in your family can be steadily diminished, and you and your family can enjoy the intimacy and security that come from worshiping the one true God.

Adapted from [Peacemaking for Families](#), by Ken Sande (Tyndale, 2002).

Endnotes

¹ I owe Paul Tripp, David Powlison, and Ed Welch of the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (www.CCEF.org) a great debt for the many insights they have given to me on this topic through their books and seminars.

² F. Samuel Janzow, *Luther's Large Catechism: A Contemporary Translation with Study Questions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), p. 13.

³ *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 16, no. 1, fall 1997.

⁴ John Piper, *Future Grace* (Sisters, Ore: Multnomah), page 9.

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