

## Romans 15:1-13: Elder's Visitation 2013

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Beloved in the Lord,

Part of the life in New Horizon is the way that the Lord has brought visitors, new faces and new possibilities. As we learn to welcome new people in, we need to ask the question asked by Rev. Donald Van Dyken, as published in the Christian Renewal, "What is the experience that others have when they meet me (us)?" Is it possible that we can come on too strong, that we are unaware that in our confidence of the church culture, we can become intimidating? Are we so excited about having someone new come in that we overwhelm them? Perhaps after having many people come and then go, we remain a little distant, not wanting to get too attached, leaving the visitor confused. Are we possibly standing in the way of another's entrance into the church?

What's more, we need to ask, are we as the family of God here at New Horizons an inviting and loving place. Do we want to invite people here to be cared for and comforted? To do that well, we must have a unity of purpose and the desire to care for one another that is evident to all come to us.

From Chapter 14 onward in Romans, Paul speaks about the division in the church and the way to unity. The letter many believe was written in Corinth, and though Paul had never been to Rome, he must have heard some things and perhaps being in Corinth informed some of his writing to the Romans. This letter, though much like Galatians, is more involved, intense, and doctrinally worked out. Likely this letter was written to prepare the Romans for a visit from Paul. Paul had hoped to go to Spain one day but wanted to visit Rome on the way. We know that from Corinth, Paul would head to Jerusalem and from there as a prisoner goes to Rome. So as Paul had to do with Corinthians now, he does with the Romans, namely to lay out the truth of the Gospel and its implication for life. In this third section of Romans which we might call service or Christian living (some think Romans is divided into sin, salvation and service and that the Heidelberg catechism is structured based on this) Paul makes clear that to love God one must love his/her neighbour as him/her self. I bring to you the Word of the Lord under the theme:

### **Christ Pleased Others So They Could Glorify the Father**

#### **1. Union With Christ 2. Communion of the Saints**

**Union** In chapter 14, Paul is speaking to the Romans about those who are weak and those who are strong. The strong in this case, have so embraced the Gospel in Christ that they have been set free in their hearts and minds from the demands of Sinai. They eat what they want, live in Christ as they want and ought, and did not worry about the Torah's dietary laws or special days. The issue was that they were likely flaunting their newfound freedom. And if this was a racial thing which we think it likely for the most part was, then the Gentiles were lording it over the Jews who felt conscience bound to keep the laws of the Pentateuch. What's more, the Jews as a people had the covenants and the word, and yet it was they who put Christ to death. The Gentiles were elevating themselves over against the Jews, and that in turn caused heartache and division in the body. The Spirit moved Paul to address those issues, and his words, as we will see, have meaning for us today too.

First, Paul writes that we— and Paul includes himself in that we— who are not conscience bound to eat only vegetables, but will eat what is before us ought to bear with the weakness of the weak. So we can read it something like this, we who have the ability to carry the weaknesses of the weak are obliged to do so. In Christ and because of His love as the stronger for the weak, we owe it our weaker brother. We do not ignore them and indeed must not look down on them or live in such a way that makes them feel less or, to keep it in context, weak or inadequate.

Remember that Paul is working in a time of transition in the church from the law Sinai to its completion and new application, the person and work of Christ. Christ has fulfilled the demands of the covenant, and so we enter into new freedom. But for the Jewish convert, this was a difficult thing to accept. Now it is not wrong in and of itself that they refused food other than vegetables, Daniel and his friends did that too. It was only wrong if they thought that if they did not do this, they could not be saved or worse than only eating vegetables was going to save them. Paul's point is not to address the vegetable eating. The question is, "How does the Jew and Gentile and the strong and weak, live together?" The answer is Christ!

Paul commands the Romans and us to the law of love, which the Spirit writes on the hearts of the people of God. See, the person who lives to please self (we are learning by indirect argument) thinks he is strong is then, in fact, either weak but in a different way or worse or not even a Christian at all. So Paul wrote earlier, "Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour." He also wrote, "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight." (Chapter 12) To the Galatians, he wrote, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." We have learned from both of the letters to the Corinthians that Paul rejoices in his weakness for then Christ is strong within him. Love ought never to be self-directed, and Luther is bang right on when he says that self-directed love is no love at all.

But how are we to do that—"Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour"? Well says Paul, "We are to please our neighbour for his good." See, there is a bit of shift from the weak and strong to every brother or sister in the Lord. We seek to make them happy, for his good and to build him up. Ok, you ask, "Are we to be men-pleasers? Well, you know the answer to that, I suppose. Again back to Romans 12, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." So Paul does not need to make that case again. When we seek to please others, we do it based on finding out what God's acceptable and perfect will is. We strive to do genuine good that is going to build up our brother or sister in the Lord. We seek to build up our neighbour, who is not in the Lord.

Still, how were these strong Roman Christians to carry the burdens of the weak and do so to please others? The answer is, and you guessed it: CHRIST.

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Paul does something interesting here. Christ is the example to follow, but there is something more profound. It is not just what Jesus does, but it is what Christ does. What I mean by that is that we are to recall what Jesus (human) Christ (anointed office-bearer—prophet, priest and king) does in his office and his humanness. Then Christ is more than an example. He is love; he is the norm that norms everything we do. Christ provides the answer to our questions of how does the strong carry the burden of the weak and how do we please our neighbour. We bear all things for the glory of God. How do we come to know of this Christ? We learn of him in the scripture, which at that time Paul wrote, is confined to the Old Testament. Paul quotes Psalm 69:9 (as we find it in our English Bibles). So to understand what Christ did, let us go to the Word of God as Paul directs us.

Psalm 69 was written during a time of great duress. It is what we call a personal lament. David then, in this time of trial, wrote that personal lament by way of inspiration and as the leader of God's people in his office as king wrote words to express the emotions of the persecuted child of God. These words are applied to Christ. David and the house of David are suffering for God's truth. Christ did that too. He, though perfect, suffered the reproaches of the enemy. But there is more. Psalm 69 makes clear that the reproaches against David and the house of Israel were a reproach against God himself. So Christ took the reproach that is our sin, guilt and misery upon himself at Golgotha to please the people of God by bringing them into fellowship with the almighty! Christ then does not seek to serve himself but to serve others so that the Father would be glorified.

The Bible tells us so. No more talk of the Old Testament is finished and does not speak to the church today! No more talk of closing it and using it as some helpful but not so important reference encyclopedia! Look what Paul is telling us! The whole scriptures were written to show us the norm of Christ that in Christ, we might have the endurance and encouragement of the hope of salvation! The whole of the Scriptures written in the past is for our instruction! God decided to provide and preserve these Words, of which he is the ultimate author that we might be comforted and encouraged. If we are going to learn to be helpers and seekers of genuine pleasure for our brothers and sisters and neighbour alike, we must be in that word that we will more deeply understand the norm of Christ who had died to take away our sins!

Paul, by way of encouragement, then pronounces his wish and his wish ensures that we understand that to welcome one another, we need divine power that comes from God alone. If we are to endure and encourage, then we must have the blessings of the God of endurance and encouragement or comfort. Paul's wish is that with mind and mouth, the church can as one in Christ confess the unity that Christ prayed for before he went to the cross as we read that in John 17. In that high priestly prayer, Jesus said, *As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake, I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.* (John 17:18-21)

When we learn this norm of Christ, then it also more intensely affects us when there is brokenness in the church. Brokenness does not bring glory to the Father. It is to attempt to frustrate the work of Christ. So the call comes to the Roman churches and our own by implication that Paul's wish is that we can do more than merely confess the words of the Apostles' Creed—that creed based on the teaching of the inspired apostles—for instance but that we actually live out of them together as the norm of Christ shapes our lives, hearts, mind and souls. More and more, we seek to become Christ-like in confession so that God of Christ and the Father of Christ will be glorified.

There then is the aim or the goal of matter. As the church reaches out in the oneness of Christ, others see and hear, and our activity of the great commission takes shape and form. Being the body, we reach out for the glory of God, and then we hope others by God's power will join in our glorification because we also have a communion of the saints who hope in Christ.

**Communion** Having made known his wish and desire for the church, Paul encourages unity by reflecting on historical fact and scriptural prophecy. Christ became a servant, or minister, to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness to show the truthfulness of the promises made to the patriarchs. Now Paul has already mentioned the faith of Abraham in the promises of the LORD and how that faith was credited to him as righteousness (Rom. 4). Abraham, Isaac and Jacob longed for the coming of Emmanuel and could sing, "O come, O come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel!" God promised a seed to Adam and a child to Abraham, who would rule a worldwide kingdom, and Abraham believed these promises. So from the Jews and to the Jews came Jesus Christ. He came to serve and save the circumcised. That is now a fact. Jesus came and suffered reproach for the Jewish children of Abraham, the children of faith. But Paul goes on to show that the service was also by way of the Jews for the Gentiles as well so that Jew and Gentile would have nothing to boast about before the Lord, in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. Then Paul once more from the Old Testament proves that God had kept his Word to Abraham so the Jews and Gentiles might together rejoice.

First Paul quotes from Psalm 18:49, which can also be found in 2 Samuel 22:50, where David, whose kingdom was growing and included the Gentile people in Canaan, said, "Therefore I will greatly praise you among the Gentiles and sing your name." It is clear that God always had the purpose of bringing the Jews under the king of Israel.

Paul then turns our attention to Deuteronomy 32:43, where Moses, in his farewell song sings, "Rejoice O Gentiles with his people"—Paul is following the Greek version of the Old Testament of the day, the Septuagint or LXX—where Moses is warning of the coming vengeance of God and calls the Gentiles to rejoice with Israel and find salvation!

Paul turns our attention to the shortest Psalm, Psalm 117:1. There we read an Old Testament Great Commission song where Israel using these inspired words sings out of the faithfulness of the Lord and calls all the nations, that is, the Gentiles, to praise the Lord

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and all people to extol the Lord. It was part of the rich fabric of worship that Israel was a promised people to fulfill the promises of the whole earth when God said to Abraham,

**And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you, I will curse, and in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.** (Gen. 12:2-3)

Right before their eyes in Rome and our eyes, we see and hear what God is doing. He is calling a church from Jew and Gentile that all the nations of the world will be blessed! Israel, too, was part of the mission of God that has been transformed by the norm of Christ as the church walks into the world with compassionate oneness confessed and expressed!

Finally, Paul reminds of the reader of Isaiah 11:10. Remember that Isaiah saw a large forest of many stumps. The great nations had fallen, even Israel, who is not even called the house of David but the stump of Jesse. Yet from the stump comes a root, even Jesus Christ, who will be the saving king. From David came the hope of the world from the Jews for the Gentiles!

Do you see beloved? How precious are all the people of God so that he gave his Son as a complete saviour! And if God so loved his people, then how can we not all of His people? How can we live as self pleasers? How can we say I am strong and not help the weak? How can we forget our weakness that Christ gave Himself to take away? Must we suffer reproach for the weak? Then that is what we will do by carrying the burden of brother and sister till they can do it on their knowing we could never have done it without the God of endurance and comfort and the norm of Christ! Christ is our hope, and in Him the saving King, we rejoice and sing praises to God and extol His name! As He promised so it is fulfilled and the church unified in confession and life becomes the very testimony of the truth of God, Christ!

How can we do this? Note how many times Paul has used the word hope. May the God of hope fill you all with joy and power in believing. Earlier Paul wrote, Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given.

(Romans 5:3-5)

Paul has been making clear that faith does not put its hope in works righteousness or circumcision or the things of the ceremonial law, or any law at all. There is no hope in only eating vegetables. No, hope is made sure when by trial and struggle, we rest finally in our hope, Christ! He is alone, our hope and saviour. He alone makes us righteous through faith created by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we, by that power, believe. Justification is by faith and that by the power of God. That faith is expressed as unity in the community: the community of hope! So Paul prays that the power of the Holy Spirit will fill the church to faith and hope, so that love in joy and peace will abound with that hope.

**Conclusion** So when the visitor comes, what impression will we make? Are we patient? Are we kind and loving? Do we confess the truth and stand together for the truth? Do we speak the truth in love? If we are to grow in these things, we must be diligent in our study of God's word for there, and there only we meet the norm of Christ, who by the power of his Spirit converts the soul and brings us faith! Let us then also be praying for people praying that the God of all hope will fill us with joy and peace that by the power of the Spirit, we may abound in hope! Amen