

## **“The Andrew Challenge: Unity in the Midst of Outreach and Offering”—Romans 15:1-21**

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*[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, [www.welovethegospel.com](http://www.welovethegospel.com).]*

Take a Bible and let's meet in Romans 15...

[Parent and Child Dedication today...Sanctity of Life Sunday]

We are in the middle of a mini-series called “The Andrew Challenge.” It's based on some characteristics we observed in Andrews, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus. The topics that the series is exploring relate to outreach, offerings, and obscurity.

Romans 15 touches on two of the three—outreach and offerings. That's the reason we planned on being in this text (as I mentioned last Sunday). In this chapter those topics come up in some interesting ways. Paul describes the outreach of God to the nations. Paul then describes his outreach efforts to the nations as well. In the midst of that he describes his outreach in a way that connects it to the notion of offering, but not the kind of offering you are probably thinking of (i.e., the financial kind). But he does eventually get to that kind of offering when he initiates a monetary offering for the benefit of believers elsewhere. So the topics of outreach and offerings come up in several ways in this chapter.

Yet all of these concerns for Paul flow out of his remarks about loving our neighbor for the sake of unity. Two big themes in many of Paul's writings are unity and mission. These topics have been touched on in his letter to the Romans at several points and now in chapter 15, where he's winding down to his conclusion, he brings them up again. In the process we will discover that the unity that God desires for a church to experience is a unity that has much to do with outreach and offerings.

Look with me at the first words of the chapter...

*“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. <sup>2</sup> Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.”* (Romans 15:1-2)

One of our “3GCs” is “The Great Commandments,” to love God and love neighbor, and the ethic that Paul describes here is tapping into that. It has to do with neighbor-love. Loving people. The “*strong*” label refers to those who have some measure of power or advantage and it's debated what that could entail. Some read it in economic, cultural, or social terms. Others see it as having more to do with spiritual maturity and understanding (i.e., the strong in faith”). It's at least calls to mind the spiritual advantage in light of the context that deals with sensitivity toward Jewish Christian brothers who have not discarded certain Old Testament ritual laws. This is how we should relate to our brothers and sisters in Christ, which chapter 14 shows. But the principle is sweeping enough to include other kinds of advantages as well that can accompany people of power, privilege, and influence. It's an ethic that drives our interaction with people outside of the church as well. I think that's why the language shifts in chapter 15 from “*brother*” to “*neighbor*.”

Paul says the “*strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.*” They act with their neighbor in mind. They seek to do good for their neighbor. They seek to build their neighbor up, not harm them, despite their weaknesses. What a great ethic! Unfortunately, too often, people

tend to think only of themselves. Their actions are driven by their own pleasure and little thought is given to the affect those actions will have on their neighbors. They don't ask, "How will this affect the community I am a part of? Will this build up or tear down? Will this harm or heal?" That's not their concern. But it is the concern of the "*strong*," of which Paul would consider himself and so he commends the "stronger" Christians in community to adopt this same approach to life.

We should conduct ourselves in a way that aims to bring unity to the body of Christ and to the local manifestation of that community at Southern Oaks. We are unifiers who bear one another's burdens and weaknesses to build one another up. We are builders, not destroyers. Unifiers, not dividers. Maybe these descriptions call to mind certain men and women among us who encourage our unity. If so, they are among the "*strong*" that Paul has in mind and they are worthy of honor.

Timothy Keller offers a number of examples of how this can look in various aspects of our lives and they are worth repeating:

- **Finances:** Christians with money are to look at their money as given to them by God to enrich and lift up those without it (see Paul's discussion of his raising of a financial gift for the poor Christians in Jerusalem, v 25-28).
- **Church leadership:** Christians in church leadership are not to arrange ministry simply to make themselves happy and comfortable, but with the outsider and the skeptic in mind.
- **Relationships:** We are not simply to relate to "our own kind" or to people who give to us and build us up emotionally. We must be willing to love and relate to people who are draining. A Christian does not walk into a room and immediately ask: *Are these people I want to be seen with? Are these people I will enjoy?* but rather: *How can I help and build up these people? Who might I be able to serve in some way?*
- **Choice of residence:** Instead of asking: *Where could I be most comfortable living?* we should ask: *Where could I be most useful to God and others?* That is why many Christians stay in the city. "Community development" is a ministry in which Christians who have the economic strength to live elsewhere choose to move into an economically devastated neighborhood and give their lives to rebuild it. It is based on the principle in this text.
- **Relationships in the church:** Paul applied this principle earlier in chapter 14 to one particular case. In the church, we are not to seek to win arguments with Christians who differ, but respect them, reconsider our own positions and, if differences persist, seek to accommodate ourselves to the sensitivities to others.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, he is not referring to compromises that relate to the Gospel and any other matter that Scripture would consider "core." But let's face it, most turmoil doesn't relate to "core" matters of faith, but to the temptation of giving "core" status to "non-core" stuff. But that propensity is associated with the "*weak*" and not the "*strong*," in Paul's mind. We need to live to show ourselves to be "*strong*." When we do, the whole community benefits. Aren't you thankful for the "*strong*" among us who live out this ethic? Those God uses to preserve and deepen our unity? I know I am. There are many of such folks among us and for them we all should give thanks.

But the specific reason Paul offers the ethic of verses 1 and 2 is because he wants the Roman church to be united when there are differences that could divide them. The church had a mix of Jewish converts to Christianity and Gentile Christians and their vastly different cultural background raised a number of questions related to how to do church and how to incorporate certain things from the Old Testament. Paul deals with that in the preceding chapters and for the sake of their unity he tells the "*strong*" to not live for their own pleasure, but to build up their weaker brethren and neighbor.

In verses 3 to 13, Paul shows that Christ is our example in all this. He's our model and inspiration. He is "Strong." This is what He has done for the Jew and the Gentile. Verse 3 starts, "For Christ did not please himself..." Instead, he bore the reproaches of those who reproached him. Far from condemning the nations, he brings people from all nations in and unites them to His people. Paul quotes a lot of Scripture there and he's very intentional in the passages he selects. He picks passages from the Old Testaments "writings," the "law," and the "prophets." Why? Because Paul wants us to understand that Christ reaching out to the nations was not a new plan.<sup>2</sup> It was the plan all along and all of the Old Testament demonstrates that (cf. last week's sermon). The whole Bible is pointing to Christ and His redemptive work that draws in the nations.<sup>3</sup>

But in the midst of that discussion Paul breaks out into a prayer for unity in verses 5 to 7. Look at those verses.

*"May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus,<sup>6</sup> that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup> Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."* (Romans 15:5-7)

This prayer helps us understand a few characteristics of the unity God desires for us.<sup>4</sup> Not any old unity, but the unity that God wants for us. Christian unity. First, of all...

### **Christian Unity Is Given by God**

This is why Paul prays for unity. This is why he mentions in verse 5 that God must "grant you to live in such harmony with one another" (15:5). This unity is supernatural and, therefore, cannot be manufactured. It is the fruit of our pursuit of Christ.

Second...

### **Christian Unity Is Accompanied by Worship**

You don't see this unity where you don't see Christ worshiped. Worship is the fruit of this unity. Worship is an expression of this unity. This is why Paul prays that God would impart this unity in order "that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (15:6). The "one voice" is almost certainly a reference to corporate worship, coming together as one to offer worship to God. This is another indicator of how important corporate worship on Sundays is.

When I wrote that sentence in my notes I got up and started talking out loud to myself and to God, pacing around in the office. The staff wasn't there at the time (because that would have been weird). Often when I'm pacing around at work, I walk into Rachel's office and grab some candy from this big container of candy for the staff and guests. I do this a lot. In fact, if you ever come to my office and see a pile of candy wrappers on my desk, it's likely because I have been thinking a lot about something that day. On this particular day, I pulled out a Jolly Rancher Chew and as I was opening it I looked up and on the table across from me was a new *Facts & Trends* magazine from Lifeway and issue was titled, "Sing: Why Corporate Worship Matters." So I had to pick it up, of course, because I was in that moment writing about corporate worship. Flipping through the pages, I found the article.

It was a very insightful article by Bob Smietana, in which he incorporates the insights of several worship leaders I respect. The thrust of the article was documenting the decline in congregational singing. On the first page, he draws from an excellent book by Mike Cosper called *Rhythms of Grace* that suggests the following:

“We’ve been taught in our churches and in the Christian marketing subculture around us to treat music as another product to consume—just as we have the rest of our faith. If something doesn’t meet our preferences, we’ve learned to discard it, join another church, and buy a different CD. We’ve learned to be spectators on Sundays—listening, enjoying, and critiquing—but the Bible unapologetically calls us to be participants.”<sup>5</sup>

That is correct. Our secular culture of consumerism has infiltrated our Christian churches and they have suffered as a result. One of the clear evidences of this is the lack of unity that often exists within churches. That’s what Paul is getting at in Romans 15. God gives unity to a church and that unity results in, is seen in, and expresses itself through, among other things, coming together in corporate worship “*that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (15:6). So when we gather together in corporate worship, it matters. It’s unifying. It strengthens and signifies our unity in the faith. It binds us together as one, as we exalt our God and Savior. So if that’s true, then corporate worship needs to be a priority for you.

But here’s what happens. Every church over time accumulates a number of ministry ventures that are not corporate in nature. They are important, serve a purpose, and need to exist. They involve people and grow people up in the faith. But if they don’t serve to encourage people to come together as a body in the corporate worship setting, they may not be unifying activities. The “*strong*” among us will see this. They will encourage the people to get plugged into the larger body. They will see those ministries as a gateway to that corporate setting. They will leverage them for the sake of unity and encourage all to be participants and not just consumers. And, of course, some are kept by providence from being among us (e.g., health challenges). But others are kept for other reasons that are not biblical and not healthy and those who are “*strong*” will labor to bring them in and encourage their engagement in corporate worship because they care about the unity of the church. They will reach out to them.

So if there are people coming to one of our small groups in a home during the week and we are not encouraging them to join us on Sunday morning, then that’s not a unifying thing. In fact, in time, it can diminish church unity inadvertently. If we have people who come to Sunday School but don’t gather with us to worship in this corporate setting, unless they are kept by providence (e.g., for some health reason that prevents them from being out for too long), then for the sake of unity we should be encouraging them to join us in corporate worship. If we have a Bible study that meets during the week, we must ask if it is contributing to the unity of the church or is it making it easier for people to not gather together in worship on Sunday morning? God is honored when we strive for unity and encourage others to lift their voices with our own.

May every ministry of the church help to bring us together as one and not serve to splinter us off. As leaders in those ministries, you have to think about these things. As brothers and sisters, you have to encourage one another in these things. And as we gather together in corporate worship, God can (we pray) bestow on us greater unity as we glorify him with “*one voice*.” He gives unity “so that” we might do this and our commitment to do so together will enhance that unity.

But not only does Paul’s prayer show that unity is a gift from God and something that is accompanied by corporate worship, he also shows, third, that

### **Christian Unity Is Built on the Gospel**

He says, in verse 7, “*Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*” Perhaps a better way to translate that would be: “*Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God*” (NIV; cf. HCSB; NASB; NLT). That acceptance language is more common in the English translations. We don’t earn Christ’s acceptance through what we do. We are accepted because of

His grace. He removed our sin by taking it upon Himself and experienced the judgment that sin brings. He rose from the dead and extends God's welcome to all who believe in Him, turning from sin in repentance and trusting in Christ for their salvation in faith. As Christians we have been made acceptable in God's eyes because of the work of Christ Jesus alone. He has accepted us. So Paul's point here is that because He has accepted us, we ought to accept one another. So the good news (or Gospel) of our acceptance, our justification, is the soil out of which our unity can grow. The unity God wants for us is built then upon the Gospel.

But don't misunderstand. The Gospel faithfully proclaimed doesn't always create unity. No! The Gospel can ruffle our feathers. Some people don't like hearing the Gospel because it challenges the status quo and its imperatives push aside our preferences at times. It's easier to seek out something that will tickle our ears. That doesn't require anything of us. That helps us address our felt needs, instead of our actual needs. That explains Paul's charge to Timothy concerning preaching:

*"I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: <sup>2</sup> preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. <sup>3</sup> For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, <sup>4</sup> and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. <sup>5</sup> As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry."* (2 Timothy 4:1-5)

In other words, the sound and biblical preaching of the Gospel and God's Word does not automatically produce unity. It can create division just as well (and does), just ask Jesus. But the kind of unity that God wants for us cannot be achieved apart from the Gospel. So the Gospel can create division, but biblical unity cannot be experienced apart from the Gospel. Unity is a byproduct of the Gospel. Just like mission. They go together because we unite around the truth and imperatives of the Gospel and then we go together on mission with God. This unity leads to mission. And that's the fourth characteristic of this unity...

### **Christian Unity Leads to Outreach**

In the verses that follow in Romans 15, Paul pivots to mission. God grants unity so that all kinds of people can come together and worship God as one voice. Missions involves reaching out to people and inviting them to saving faith in Jesus so that they too might come in and join us in that worship. So how did that play out in Paul's life specifically? Look at verses 14 and following...

*"I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. <sup>15</sup> But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God <sup>16</sup> to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. <sup>17</sup> In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. <sup>18</sup> For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, <sup>19</sup> by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; <sup>20</sup> and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, <sup>21</sup> but as it is written, 'Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.'" (Romans 15:14-21)*

What is that? That is Paul welcoming others in because he has been welcomed. Reaching out because God reached out to him. Bringing nations in because Paul was brought in himself. But the point I will close with has to do with the way Paul described his outreach to the Gentiles. In verse 16, Paul describes himself as “*a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.*” That is an incredible statement.

Paul is describing his missionary efforts as though they are a priestly service offered up to God in worship. And what are the offerings he is presenting to God? People. Sinners saved by grace. Gentiles made acceptable to God through Christ. That’s Paul’s offering to God. And in couching this in priestly language, Paul shows that his outreach was an act of worship.

Let that sink in. Last week we considered how God desires for us to participate in His mission in the world and, therefore, reaching out to others with the Gospel is a matter of calling. We are called by God to engage in outreach. But it’s not *only* a matter of calling for the Christian. It’s a matter of worship. We reach out to bring others in as an act of worship. Our outreach is preparing an offering for the Lord. That’s what Paul suggests here. He saw the people he ministered to as his offering to God! That’s incredible. Outreach is not just our calling. It’s an act of worship.

But note that the offering prepared is made possible, according to verse 18, because “*Christ has accomplished*” it through us. So God gets all the glory for the offering that we get to present in worship. Notice also that Paul is not *just* talking about conversions here as verse 18, again, helps us to see. What is it that Christ accomplished? “*...bringing the Gentiles to obedience*”. So it’s not just their conversion that’s in view, but their spiritual maturity, their discipleship journey, their sanctification seen in their obedience. By the grace of God, Paul has been used by God to play a role in bringing people to that obedience. In chapter 12 Paul called all Christians to “*present your bodies as a living sacrifices*” (12:1), and in as much as Paul has been used to encourage people to do so, he has an offering to bring to God.

In this way, worship and witness are united. It’s a beautiful cycle. Unity leads to worship. Worship leads to witness. Witness leads to the creation of new worshiper. Those new worshipers enhance our unity and in turn become witnesses who God uses to bring in more worshipers.<sup>6</sup>

So Paul is saying that he’s proud of the work of God. He has an offering to give to the Lord. It’s an offering of people—who have come to and matured in faith—and he gets to offer up to God as worship. The question for us then is what kind of offering are we prepping? Who are we reaching out to and sharing the Gospel with? Who are we discipling unto obedience? These are our offering to the Lord.

Our outreach and disciple-making is not just our calling, it’s our act of worship. I hope you will look at the various ministries you are engaged in as preparations for this offering. When you disciple your children, you are preparing this offering. When you share a verse from Scripture with a hurting friend, you are preparing this offering. When you engage in outreach, sharing the Gospel with others, you are preparing your offering. When God uses you to bring others to Christ and uses you to mature others in Christ, you are preparing your offering. It changes the way you look at ministry, doesn’t it? It changes the way you hear the Great Commission, doesn’t it? It’s not just the obligation of our calling. It is the preparation of our worship. We reach out so that we can offer up.

So how are you preparing your offering? What souls are seeking? What saints are you discipling? I want you to give some thought this week to the offering you are preparing for that day. Next week we will pick up in Romans 15 and see where Paul goes next.

Let’s pray...

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<sup>1</sup> These examples are taken verbatim from Timothy Keller, *Romans 8-16 for You: For Reading, for*

<sup>2</sup> A former professor of mine, Doug Moo, points this out: “Paul cites every part of the Old Testament—the ‘writings’ (vv. 9b and 11), the ‘law’ (v. 10), and the ‘prophets’ (v. 12)—to show that inclusion of Gentiles with Jews in the praise of God has always been part of God’s purposes.”<sup>2</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 878. Also cited in Keller, 156.

<sup>3</sup> “Gospel unity across every divide and disagreement is what God has always been working toward. As the Roman Christians—Jew and Gentile, weak and strong, rich and poor, and so on—meet together to praise the Root of Jesse, Christ Jesus, they are expressing their ‘spirit of unity among [themselves] as [they] follow Christ Jesus’ (v 5); and so they are embodying God’s plan, and bringing him glory (v 6). But...only God can give this kind of unity—so Paul prays that he would do just that, through his Spirit (v 13).” Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Keller (153-155) describes these three characteristics as well. He describes the unity as “a supernatural gift,” as being associated with “our worship together,” and as being “based on our justification in Christ.” These are the same points I am making in different words and applications.

<sup>5</sup> The article was titled “Finding Our Voice: Why the Decline in Congregational Singing Matters—and How to Fix It” by Bob Smietana (*Facts & Trends*; Nashville: LifeWay, Winter 2017), 13ff. The quote was drawn from Mike Cospers, *Rhythms of Grace: How the Church’s Worship Tells the Story of the Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 379.