

## BIBLE STUDY: ROMANS #15

*Scripture of Lesson: Romans 15: 1~33*

In every congregation there are the poor, the weak and minorities that need to be helped, embraced and accepted by those more capable and strong. In this chapter Paul encourages the Christians in Rome to do just that so that the church be united in love and hope of having Christ as their supreme king in their midst. This is in fulfillment of the Lord's command to love one another. Although Paul had never met these Christians but only heard about them, his thoughts and prayers were headed to them as they are so evident in his epistle. May our thoughts and prayers as well as helping hands reach beyond the immediate boundary of our family and church to reach those in need in the community and in other parts of the world.

### 1. Help the weak and the poor: v. 1~6

In verse 1 Paul encourages those who are strong to bear the infirmities of the weak and not to please themselves. The theory of evolution by Charles Darwin says that the species today are the result of survival of the fittest, that is, the strongest and the smartest. Then, why is the world full of the weak, the sick and the poor today if this theory were valid? Hitler and his Nazi party espoused the doctrine of the German racial supremacy and, based on this principle, killed some six million Jews whom they considered unworthy of survival. In the early Christian churches feeding the poor was a significant chore because the poor people in Jerusalem and surrounding area flocked to the disciples as they had done to Jesus during His ministry. The anticipation was there among the poor and the weak that they could receive good help although their religious system was ignoring their needs. In fact the motive of appointing elders was to free the apostles from the responsibility of this charity work to enable the apostles to focus on the spiritual work.

Ever since this first century example charity work has been one of the major areas of good work in Christian churches. As the apostles wisely shared this part of church governance responsibility with the elders who were not in the ministry, each church needs to establish and maintain a balanced and harmonious set of programs, governed by a sound godly set of principles based on charity and sense of mission, so that the Lord's command to love our neighbors could be practiced in the spirit of humble servanthood, following after the example of our Lord who never rejected any poor, sick and needy coming to Him asking for help.

*Discussion topic: What would be desirable guiding principles for a church's charity work?*

### 2. Jews and Gentiles accept one another in unity: v. 7~13

Here, Paul is reaffirming his apostleship for not only the Jews but the Gentiles as he did in verse 11: 13:

*For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry.*

Paul's claim of his apostleship is based on the OT prophecies about Jesus, a root of Jesse, that is of King David, who would rise to reign over the Gentiles [v. 12]. If Jesus Christ would reign over the Gentiles, there

had to be a servant who would be called to bring in the Gentiles so that they could be made God's children just as the Lord had called Abraham. Paul was acutely aware of the personal mission, which he had received from Jesus who appeared to Paul in person. Thus, Paul was very confident that he had been called into this holy ministry for the Gentiles.

At the same time, since the church congregation was composed of both Jews and Gentiles, unity between these two groups was essential. One key way to encourage their unity was that both groups see the dispensation of God through the ages that the promise God had made to Abraham had to flow down to the Gentiles. For this mission Christ came – for all humanity that included both the Jews and the Gentiles. And the ministry of Christ had to reach out to the Gentiles, to bring them into the Abrahamic covenant through faith in Christ, though not through flesh and blood. By carefully explaining this important mystery of God's plan to the Christians Paul was hoping that these Christians are filled with the knowledge and goodness of God so that they could admonish those few who lacked such understanding [v. 14].

And Paul declares once again his ministry of Jesus to the Gentiles in v. 16:

*that I might be a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God, that the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. [v. 15: 16]*

This example of Paul's persuasion of the Roman Christians sets a very wonderful precedent to Christian pastors when governing their congregations. Instead of laying down the principles that he holds important for a church, a pastor should clearly explain to the congregation God's principles in a way that he has been persuaded by the Holy Spirit so that the congregation may, in turn, respond in a godly way to the pastoral guidelines with knowledge and goodness in them.

*Discussion topic: How can we promote unity among different social groups in a church congregation?*

### **3. Paul's ministry among the Gentiles: v. 14~21**

In verses 18 and 19 Paul speaks of 'word and deed, mighty signs and wonders' which were performed by himself through the help of the Spirit of God so that the Gentiles could be brought into God's fold as obedient children. This speaks of a teamwork between Paul's dedicated ministry and the Spirit of God working together to achieve proselytization of the Gentiles. Whenever a servant of God has received a mission to do God's work and he/she places whole life and dedication to this work, this servant has the privilege of God's spirit's assistance in speaking, deeds, signs and wonders to help convince the sinners of God's power, thus winning their hearts. Paul was somewhat proud of this help he had received from the Holy Spirit.

Paul emphasizes that such concerted teamwork between the Spirit of God and his own labor was for the sole purpose of "offering up the Gentiles as acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Ghost [v. 16]." So he is referring to the two parts of Christian ministry – one, to bring in unbelievers into obedience to the gospel; two, to bring about sanctification of the believers so that the church is prepared as worthy 'bride of Christ' in the end.

*Discussion topic: Does the Holy Spirit enable signs and wonders in a Christian ministry today as He did in the first century? What are some of the examples of such signs and wonders that you have witnessed?*

#### **4. Paul's desire and plan to visit Rome: v. 22~33**

Paul desired to visit Rome. If so, it would have been a much shorter trip to simply fork over to Italy from Macedonia instead of taking a round-about detour through Turkey and Jerusalem, where he met much persecution and seeming unnecessary prosecution by the rulers of Palestine of that time. Why did Paul decide to take this trouble-laden circuitous route to Rome instead of taking the easy route?

One of the reasons is clarified in this chapter. Christian believers of today's Greece [Macedonia and Achaia], upon hearing the news of the economic difficulty of the fellow brethren in Israel due to a long, severe draught, took up collections as financial aid to these poverty-stricken brethren [v. 26]. Paul and a few fellow travelers were entrusted with the task of taking this money and delivering it to the church in Israel. Paul's plan was to carry out this task in Jerusalem, visit Rome, then visit Spain. There is no scriptural reference that indicates Paul ever visited Spain, but a couple of early church fathers' writings reveal Paul's evangelical activities in Italy and Spain between 63AD, when he was judged innocent in a trial, and 68AD, when he was beheaded by Emperor Nero.

But the more important reason for this circuitous trip of Paul was that the Lord God had planned to use Paul to witness the gospel before the leaders of the world at this time. This plan was revealed to Ananias as follows:

*But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake." [Acts 9: 15-16]*

We have been trained to make rational decisions based on what is economics and efficiency. However, God's plans for our lives are sometimes far from efficiency and economic sense. God's people are sensitive to what His will is so that we come to the place of confessing, "Not my will but Thine be done." When such a plan of God is revealed to us and they involve sacrifices or painful experiences, we might be tempted to find a way out of them. Paul, however, was very much willing to give his full dedication and heart to it. On his way to Jerusalem he made a stop in Miletus. Elders from this city and Ephesus came and tried to dissuade Paul from making this trip because a prophet had prophesied of certain suffering of Paul in Jerusalem and beyond. However, Paul showed firm determination to press on:

*And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. [Acts 20: 22-24]*

*Takeaway lesson: We are here as Christians thanks to the dedication and sacrifices of God's servants and His people in earlier times. We should be thankful for them. At the same time when God calls us to lay down our life for His work, will we be willing as Paul was to follow the leadings of the Holy Spirit?*