

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

January 23, 2022

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Disagreeing Without Dividing**

#### **Love, Powered by Hope**

(Romans 15:1-5, 13)

Study #3

#### **Introduction: Not my business...**

Last summer, one of my neighbors was getting his yard mowed by a kid who lives nearby. The kid was doing a horrible job of mowing, so I walked over and had a little talk with him.

The kid had mowed right over a nice patch of wildflowers. He skipped a whole section on the side yard. Plus, he was going too slow. I told him what I had observed. I pointed out his errors.

Then, this kid straightened his shoulders and calmly told me that my neighbor had told him to mow down the wildflowers, that he had been told to not mow the side yard, and that he was going slow to ensure that he didn't miss anything.

I said, "Oh..." and walked back home. And, no, this didn't happen.

I wouldn't have done this. It isn't my job to evaluate the work of someone who is working for someone else. It was none of my business.

That young man only had to please the homeowner who had hired him. Not me. And this is a big part of what the Apostle Paul has been saying to us over the past couple of Sundays.

You don't answer to me before God, and I don't answer to you. We each answer for ourselves before God. Or, as Paul said, [*Romans 14:12*]...*each one of us will give an account of himself to God.*

Over the past couple of Sundays, we've covered a lot of ground in what I've referred to as PG-13 sermons. Not that the material is inappropriate. It is that Paul is calling us to mature thinking.

For instance, he says that each one of us is to arrive at firm convictions about matters of conscience, where the Bible gives us no "*Thus saith the Lord!*"

We are each to decide what is the most God-honoring way to live in this or that arena of life - and do that.

AND we are to lovingly accept that other Christ-followers will come to their own convictions and may come to different conclusions about matters like movies, use of social media, music, politics, and the level of involvement in politics, and so much more.

When we do disagree with each other we will choose to believe the best about each other, we will keep talking WITH each other, we will love each other, and we will leave the judging to Jesus.

When necessary, we will even place limits on the freedoms we enjoy so that we don't cause our brother or sister in Christ to stumble and fall into sin.

All these ways of dealing with each other are the paths to peace. They pave the way to our being a great witness for Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In a recent 3-part series of articles in World Magazine, the authors remind us that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called 11:00 on Sunday "*the most segregated hour of Christian America.*" The articles call attention to the racial progress that has been made in our nation but point out that another form of segregation has developed. A bitter election cycle, pandemic restrictions, a border crisis, and more have prompted many to stop attending church or to move to a different church. As one person who was interviewed remarked, "*Why would anyone believe in Jesus when they see professed Jesus-lovers slandering one another?*"

This morning brings us to the last message in this mini-series. I've wrestled a good bit with how to wrap up and have decided to wrap up the way Paul wrapped up his treatment of these issues.

It is instructive to notice that, in wrapping up, Paul didn't bring up every possible item that might have divided the church at Rome - and I'm sure that his list could have been long.

So, neither am I going to spend the next thirty minutes exploring all the possible faith and culture items that might divide us - and yes, the list would be long.

We'll follow Paul's lead. He, having urged his readers to lead loving, others-centered lives, drew their attention to a few key truths that would equip them to love well. That's what we're going to do, too.

Our final look into the theme of disagreeing without dividing takes us back to Romans, where Paul speaks directly to the ones he calls *strong*.

### **Your High Calling to An Others-Centered Life (vv. 1-2)**

#### **The Strong are to Help the Weak (v. 1)**

*Bearing weaknesses (v. 1a)*

**[1] Now we who are strong ought to bear<sup>2</sup> the weaknesses of those without strength...**

This is the language of obligation. The *strong* are obliged to help the weak.

There are a few places in the New Testament where we who belong to Jesus are called to "**bear with one another**" (Colossians 3:13), as in "*put up with each other.*"

The idea is that we are to put up with each other's quirks and idiosyncrasies. We put up with each other's failings.

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<sup>2</sup> When Paul speaks of "**bearing the weaknesses**" of others he uses the same word that was used of Christ bearing His cross (bastazo - Greek) in the Gospels.

After all, Jesus puts up with us. Surely, we can be as understanding with each other as He is with us.<sup>3</sup>

But that kind of "**bearing**" is not what Paul is urging here in Romans 15. Here, he is calling those who are strong to flex their muscles and use whatever strength they have to bear burdens that the weak can't handle on their own.

The strong are to take some of the weight off the shoulders of the weak and carry it themselves.

In the early years of taking backpacking trips with my sons, Ben and Zach, I would carry a heavier load than they did. When they were twelve and fourteen, they couldn't carry a five-day load of supplies into the mountains. It was only right that I should have carried more.

Of course, as the years passed, our pack weights evened out. And it wasn't long before early mornings in camp would find me sneaking stuff from my pack into theirs, along with the occasional rock (to slow them down).

Strength brings advantages in life, and that's obviously true physically.

To have strength means that you have reserves for emergencies. To have strength means that you can come alongside someone without strength and help carry, bear, their load.<sup>4</sup>

But Paul is speaking of strength as he used it throughout Romans 14, in a moral, spiritual sense.

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<sup>3</sup> One time, after the disciples were unable to cast out a demon from a man because of their own lack of faith, Jesus - the perfect Man - turned to them in what seems to me to look like frustration and said, [*Matthew 17:17*] "**How long shall I put up with you**?"

<sup>4</sup> This is the thought we find in [*Galatians 6:2*] **Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ.**

The strong Christian understands that she / he is free to enjoy all the freedoms that are theirs in Jesus. The strong Christian isn't limited in terms of food or drink or special days. The strong Christian is at liberty to enjoy life in all its fullness. Jesus has set him / her free.

The weak Christian, though, does not enjoy all the freedoms that he might enjoy in Jesus. His conscience limits his freedom. He is restricted.

So, Paul tells those who are strong that they are obliged to help those who are weak in faith.

That's the first thought. That first thought leads Paul to his second thought.

*Strong Christians should not just please themselves (v. 1b)*

***[1] Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength, and not just please ourselves.***

It is tragic when the strong are only concerned for themselves because that leaves the weak vulnerable. Sadly, that is often the way the world works, leaving the weak to carry the strong.

It can happen in governments and businesses, in churches and in families. We could all come up with a list of cases where the strong have lorded it over the weak, have taken advantage of the less advantaged, and have stolen privileges from the under-privileged.

But if that is the way the world often works, it is NOT the way it is to be in Jesus. Jesus turns the world's power dynamic on its head and tells the strong to use their strength to help the weak.

Jesus gave some of His most memorable illustrations to get across this exact thought.

He placed children in front of His disciples and said, "*THIS is what greatness looks like in My kingdom.*" (Matthew 18)

He washed His disciples' feet, telling them, "*As I have done to you, you do for each other.*" (John 13)

He painted a picture of a kingdom in which the strong are on the bottom supporting the weak. In Jesus' kingdom, the strong are not only concerned for themselves.

We instinctively look out for our own interests, and that's OK. Really, it is. It is human, not sinful, for you to be concerned about the things that concern you.

It is distinctively Christian, though, to also have on your radar a deep, abiding commitment to please others, to bear up the weak.

And, of course, where the rubber meets the road is where what pleases me runs into conflict with your interests.

Will I forego my legitimate pleasures to benefit and bless and love you? Or, as Paul says...

**We All Are to Build Up Our Neighbor (v. 2)**

***[2] Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.***

We need to notice that there are words after "*please his neighbor.*" We are not to simply give our neighbor what is pleasing to our neighbor. No, we are to do our neighbor "*good.*"

That's a strong thing. It is to give our neighbor what she needs rather than just what she wants.<sup>5</sup>

Your weaker neighbor's life with God is under construction. It's got a great foundation. The framing has gotten off to a good start. But there's a lot of work left to be done.

Jesus wants you to add bricks and boards to your neighbor's life, to help him grow, to build him up.

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<sup>5</sup> That is, for his "*building up*" Romans 14:19.

It's a radical thing to be concerned with someone else's building up. This is graduate level Christian discipleship. And this life orientation comes with a price tag.

For you to commit to building up your neighbor will mean that in some ways, you will choose to not exercise your freedoms. At times, you will limit your liberties for the sake of your neighbor, your friend.

To live this way - where you place a limiter (a governor) on your own freedoms is beautiful. It's noble and commendable and godly - and it is hard. You are going to need help to learn how to navigate this hard path.

Paul points the way forward and tells us how he did it. The strategy he employed wasn't tricky and it wasn't complicated.

First, he found strength to live for others by simply remembering Jesus.

### **The Beauty Of An Others-Centered Savior (v. 3)**

#### **A Review of the Life of Jesus (v. 3a)**

##### ***[3a] For even Christ did not please Himself***

###### *Even Jesus*

Notice that word, "**even.**" "**Even**" is there because if anyone might have legitimately sought to please Himself, it was Christ. But "**even**" Christ did not do this.

He was the Son of God, and more than anyone else ever, Jesus practiced what Paul is preaching. He never used His strength to take advantage of the weak. He always used His strength to help the weak.

Let's think of the times when Jesus might have been especially tempted to please Himself.

###### *Even when...*

Each Christmas, we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the God-Man. He was born in Bethlehem's stables. His first cradle was a barnyard feeding trough. The Incarnation was a model of NOT using His strength for Himself.

When He was a toddler, it was only because His parents rushed down to Egypt that He escaped murder at the hands of the mad King Herod. He could have, but didn't, use His strength to self-rescue.

Back in Galilee, He endured the hardships of being raised in a poor family that lived among an oppressed people. He didn't seek to escape that setting.

At the launch of His three-year ministry, He went to the desert to be alone with God and endured forty days of not eating. At any point during those forty days, He could have turned desert stones into bread to "*please Himself.*" He didn't.

I've got to believe that there were times, while He was traveling around with His disciples, when He would have loved to have taken more time for rest. He didn't, though, and that was for their sakes. He was often exhausted - and that was for them.

We read in John's Gospel (John 6) that after He fed thousands of people with a few small loaves of bread and some fish, the crowds tried to make Him king. We would have understood if He had accepted the throne, right then and there.

But He passed on the crown, knowing that He first had to bear the unpleasant cross.

Can't you imagine that during His many confrontations with the religious rulers - men who rejected and abused Him - He was tempted<sup>6</sup> to prove that He was who He claimed to be through a show of power? He didn't do that, though, because He had not come to earth to please Himself, to show off, or to impress people with His power.

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<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 2:18 says that He was tempted, but never succumbed to any temptation.

And then, most especially on the cross, when He took on Himself your sin and mine, He did not please Himself.<sup>7</sup> He could have, but He didn't.

That is how Jesus lived. And it's not a surprise that He lived this way because even before He was born, there were predictions that this was the course His life would take.

### **A Preview to the Life of Jesus (v. 3b)**

***[3b] but as it is written, "THE TAUNTS OF THOSE WHO TAUNT YOU HAVE FALLEN ON ME."***

That line is taken from Isaiah, chapter 53, a passage written hundreds of years before Jesus' birth.

In quoting these words, Paul reminds us that the plan was always that Jesus would be a Suffering Servant before He would be a Conquering King.

Jesus bore the hostility of angry, hateful people who hurled abuse at Him while He was on the cross. Jesus also bore God's hostility toward all people by dying on the cross. And He also bore the guilt of our hostility against God.

Jesus took all of the liabilities set against us on Himself. No, Jesus was definitely not out to please Himself.

And here is the applicational zinger.

*A zinger of an application*

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<sup>7</sup> Here in Romans 15, Paul focuses on Jesus' commitment to serve us, just as he did in Philippians 2, where we read this: *[5] Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, [6] who, although He existed in the form of God did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, [7] but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of men. [8] Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

Paul reflected on a life of putting aside his own freedoms and liberties for the sake of his brothers and sisters, and he remembered Jesus. ***"Even Christ did not please Himself..."***

Paul concluded that if Jesus, the God-Man, was more committed to pleasing others than to pleasing Himself, then surely, he could do the same.

Following Jesus means that we put aside self-pleasing ways. Having received His grace, mercy, and love, we are to live for each other's good, to each one's building up.

So, we pray for each other. We serve each other. We deliver meals, help with childcare, and check up on each other. We love.

And if love involves going without a legitimate pleasure to bless your brother or sister, you'll happily do that. If love involves bending to another culture's traditions to better represent Jesus, you'll gladly do that.

Paul was convinced that whatever inconvenience or challenge or suffering he had to endure to please and to build up others could never compare with what Jesus put up with to build us up.

Paul gained strength to help the weak by remembering Jesus' self-denying ways. Jesus' example fueled Him with hope.

Not hope that it would be easy to use his strength to help the weak. Not even hope that he would always be appreciated. He wasn't, and neither will we always be appreciated for helping.

There will be times when you give yourself to build up someone you love, and your help is received with a yawn. You don't even get, "Thanks!"

What do you do then? Quit? Give up? Throw in the towel? No, you remember Jesus.

Remembering Him convinces you that an others-centered life is the best, most beautiful, most joy-filled, and most God-honoring life possible.

Remembering Him nurtures the conviction that living for others - with all the suffering and sacrifice and loss that will entail - will all be worth it.

To gain strength to help the weak, we remember Jesus, and we look to Scripture.

### **The Hope We Need to Lead An Others-Centered Life (vv. 4-5, 13)**

#### **Hope Comes from Scripture (v. 4)**

*The Old Testament - written for our instruction (v. 4a)*

***[4a] For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction***

Earlier times = Old Testament

From Paul's vantage point "*earlier times*" is a reference to what we call the Old Testament. It's the Jewish Bible. And there is nothing written in the Old Testament that is not, in some sense, for us.

The poetry is for us, as is the wisdom literature. The teaching sections and the histories and the narratives are for us. The prophetic sections, the covenants and the commands are "*for our instruction.*"

Now, throughout the book of Romans Paul has gone to great lengths to show that the Law is not binding on us, and that Christians are not under obligation to the Old Testament Law.

So, he doesn't mean that we are to obey the 613 commands listed in the Old Testament. But it is still for our instruction. And he isn't saying that there is inherent merit in knowing biblical factoids.

More than a textbook - Scripture LIVES!

Remember that Jesus saved His most scathing rebukes for the people of His day who knew the most about the Bible: the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were famous for knowing the Bible without really "knowing" the Bible, without allowing it to travel from their heads to their hearts.<sup>8</sup>

But used properly, handled as the living word of God it is, Scripture is indispensable for us when we want to follow Jesus into a hard obedience.

For instance, watch how Paul told an important part of the Old Testament story of Abraham (Romans 4) to *instruct* us about receiving the gift of salvation.

God gave a promise to old Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son, and from that son, many descendants.

He then reminded us that Abraham went outside of his tent that night, looked up, saw the stars, and believed that God would make his and Sarah's descendants as numerous as those stars. (Genesis 15)

Paul quoted Genesis to make the point: ***[Romans 4:3] Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.***

That story is the cornerstone proving that justification before God is always on the basis of faith, never works. The value of that story is that it affirms that God values our simple faith in His promises.<sup>9</sup>

That story has equipped Christians for two thousand years to stand firm against any reliance on works to gain eternal life.

It is when we meditate and ruminate and cogitate on the truths of Scripture that the Holy Spirit takes that truth and applies it to our hearts. We are then *instructed*.

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<sup>8</sup> Even to this day, Hassidic Jews require an amazingly thorough knowledge of the Law from their rabbis. They memorize large sections from the Torah, paying attention to not only the words, but to the number of words, to the position of the words on the written page, and to the number of letters that make up the words.

<sup>9</sup> The great scientist, Jean Louis Agassiz, once remarked, "*Facts are stupid things.*" I don't think that it degrades Scripture to agree with him. Separate from how the facts of Scripture touch our lives, they are facts, and nothing more.

And when we are rightly instructed from Scripture, what will be the result?

*The Old Testament - written for our hope (v. 4b)*

***[4b]...that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.***

We're looking for hope today. Hope that will strengthen us to not judge, but to lay aside our liberties to help our brothers and sisters in Jesus.

You will find hope from ***"what was written in earlier times."***<sup>10</sup>

So, make Scripture your own. Learn it, love it, live it, and let it loose. Looking at what is written in both the Old and New Testaments brings us to what will keep us going when we feel like we've hit the wall and can't serve and love and build up.

In Scripture we find hope because when we take up our Bibles and read, we are not just reading a book. We are listening to a Voice.

### **Hope Comes from God (vv. 5, 13)**

***[5] Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus<sup>11</sup>...***

***[13] Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.***

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<sup>10</sup> This is exactly the point of Hebrews 11.

<sup>11</sup> It has been suggested by some that 15:6 is actually the conclusion to the letter to the Romans, and that everything which follows was a later addition. I disagree, but it is easy to understand the sense in which 15:1-6 is a climactic point in the book in terms of a call to apply all that we have been instructed about with strong demonstrations of love. In terms of exhortation, it may be better to see Romans 15:13 as the fitting end to the book.

It is God who gives perseverance and encouragement. It is God who gives hope. He is ***"the God of hope."***

When we talk about someone "having love" we mean that they are choosing to love. Likewise, those who "have faith" are choosing to trust. They are flexing their faith muscle.

So also, to "have hope" is to choose to hope, to flex our hope muscle.

Hope is a strong Christian virtue. The Christian who hopes has seen it all, has thrown away his rose-colored glasses, has endured much, and still doesn't despair, because he takes God at His Word and looks to ***"the God of hope."***

You believe in Jesus, so your hope is firm that you will spend eternity with God in glory.

As long as this life may last, and as long as it may seem to be on a hard day, it is by comparison with eternity (1 Peter 1:6) only ***"a little while"*** filled with (2 Corinthians 4:7) ***"momentary, light affliction."***

Let the reality of your eternal future in heaven fuel you with hope as you give yourself to ***"build up"*** those around you.

Further, you have a firm hope that God will richly reward you for faithfulness in this life. Jesus knows how to reward those who serve Him. You will be amply rewarded for all the times that you have served your neighbor ***"for his good, to his edification."***

And you can have a sure hope of experiencing the beautiful, mouth-watering, satisfying, abundant life Jesus promised (John 10) as you use your strength to help the weak.

### **Conclusion:**

Quite a few years ago (15-20 years ago), it was common for a few of us to leave church on Sundays, drive over to a nearby school and play Ultimate Frisbee on the football field for a couple of hours.

(Ultimate frisbee is sort of a combination of football and soccer, using a frisbee.)

The games were fun and there were often twenty or thirty (or more) people playing. The games were also competitive, with middle and high schoolers, college students, and parents all going after it.

On some days, games were more edifying than on other days.

I remember with regret some of the days when younger kids wanted to join in the fun and play, too. The big kids - of all ages - would, on a bad day, grudgingly let them play, but the game didn't change.

It stayed competitive, intense. The younger players didn't get included. They stood around a lot. They didn't know what to do.

Feelings got hurt. It wasn't a great look for a church playing Ultimate Frisbee on a Sunday afternoon.

But some days were far better.

I remember with delight other days when the younger kids asked to play and were welcomed on to the field. Teams were chosen in such a way that nobody's feelings got hurt.

And the game changed. The pace slowed. It was less intense.

The older, more experienced players passed the frisbee to the younger kids. Softly.

The opposing team let the weaker players learn how to catch without interference. Sometimes, if a younger player, dropped the pass, both teams would agree to a do-over - until the player caught the pass. And then everybody cheered.

Plays were planned so that the younger ones could shine and even score. The rules weren't enforced all that strictly on the newer players.

On those days, the game was beautiful. It gave a good picture of how the church is to be when we're doing life and ministry together.

There are now and always will be people in the church who are in the earliest stages of walking with Jesus. Some have walked on to the field having suffered, having been beaten up by life, having no experience with God.

They want to play, but they're going to need some help from the stronger players who have walked with Jesus for a while and who have matured in Jesus.

The more experienced Jesus followers will gladly let the newer ones have some do-overs. They'll toss some soft passes. They'll run plays to let the new ones shine. In a word, there will be grace.

And when that happens, it will be beautiful.

The impact for God is virtually nil when strong Christians run roughshod over the weak, when each one looks only to his or her own interests, when we judge each other, and when we only love when it is convenient to do so.

However, when we find hope for an others-centered life from the example of Jesus, from the stories found in the Bible, and from the promises of God, we play the game with grace, and the impact for God is stunning.