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Sermon Notes

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Living Beyond Selfish Pleasures: Pleasing God by Pleasing Others

Romans 15:1-3

Introduction: The Weak and the Strong

Two of the greatest ideological enemies of Christianity of the Twentieth Century were Communism and Darwinism. Both parted company with Christianity on the issue of how the strong relate to the weak.

First, Communism:

In 1875, German Philosopher Karl Marx wrote a book entitled *Critique of the Gotha Program*. In it he stated that the ultimate banner over a communist society would be

From each according to his ability, to each according to his need

The phrase incorporates the ideal that, under a communist system of government, every person shall produce to the best of their ability in accordance with their talent, and each person shall receive the fruits of this production in accordance with their need, irrespective of what they have produced

Communism sought to accomplish this by force of a strong, repressive government

But the idea is essentially Biblical: Strong people should use their strength to serve and help the weak

It began in the Exodus, when the manna given as bread from heaven

Exodus 16:16-18 This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Each one is to gather as much as he needs. Take an omer for each person you have in your tent.'"¹⁷ The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little.¹⁸ And when they measured it by the omer, he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little. Each one gathered as much as he needed.

The idea is this: the young, strapping men were able to gather far more manna than they needed for themselves; then they could share the extra they had gathered with the weak, infirm, elderly who could not gather much

Thus: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

Paul used the same principle in urging the Corinthians to share their money with poor Christians in Jerusalem.

This idea of the strong using their strength to serve the weak is clearly established in the early church's astonishing vision of life together:

Acts 2:44-45 All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

Acts 4:32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.

And Paul set the example in the way the strong should help the weak. In his farewell address to the Ephesian elders, he said:

Acts 20:34-35 You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. ³⁵ In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

Context: Romans

Eleven chapters of gospel doctrine

Now: Application to Christian life

Romans 12-14: How Christians should be treating other people, living with other people, dealing with other people, both inside and outside of the church

Amazing: Paul gives almost a chapter and a half to this issue of strong and weak Christians, struggling over debatable issues

Reason: A Spirit-filled church that is happy in the gospel of grace, holy in resisting sin, and united in helping each other is the most powerful weapon on the face of the earth for the advancement of the gospel and the crushing of Satan's Evil Empire

Church at Rome:

Mixed church; Jews and Gentiles trying to make it together; probably some dissension about the Laws of Moses... the Jewish lifestyle

Paul desires the strong Christians to help the weak, and not allow anyone of Christ's precious ones to slip through the cracks

There they were in Rome... surrounded by all the pagan pomp and power of the Imperial City, surrounded by the old way of life in paganism, surrounded by everything the world had to offer

It would have been so easy for the fragile coalition of Jew and Gentile church to fragment and for pieces of the crumbling structure to fall away... for people to slip through the cracks and be lost to the church

I. Darwinism vs. Christianity: The Strong and the Weak

Romans 15:1 We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.

A. "The Survival of the Fittest": Strong Devouring the Weak

1. British economist Charles Spencer; *Principles of Biology* (1864) coined a new term, "Survival of the fittest" after reading Darwin's *The Origin of the Species*
2. Darwin used the term "natural selection"
3. Spencer applied this idea to all areas of life, especially to economics

Companies which offer better goods and services survive better in the marketplace and tend to accumulate an ever-growing market share. Poorly-adapting companies will be forced out by better-adapting ones: "killed" by the competition.

It's a "dog eat dog" world out there... the bigger dogs eat the smaller ones

4. The brutal world of nature

"If there are any marks of all special design in creation, one of the things most evidently designed is that a large proportion of all animals should pass their existence in tormenting and devouring other animals" (J.S. Mill, 1874).

Alfred Lord Tennyson, struggling with the brutality and viciousness of the animal world after the death of a young friend, described it as

"nature red in tooth and claw" "In Memoriam" Cantos, 1850

5. Evolutionary thinking links humanity to brutal domination of the weak
 - a. A strong boy tormenting a weaker animal
 - b. A strong brother beating up and killing a weaker brother
 - c. A strong man dominating and abusing his wife
 - d. Strong parents abusing their weak and frail children

- e. A strong people rising to conquer a weaker people... the rise and fall of the world... one human empire after another crushing and devouring frail helpless people

Daniel 7:7 "After that, in my vision at night I looked, and there before me was a fourth beast-- terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts, and it had ten horns.

This was the Roman empire... a BEAST

The center of that Roman empire was Rome itself, where this church was

Rome was the eternal picture of "might makes right", of a dominating power so strong that the world lay bound in trembling fear at its feet, too weak to break the shackles of its domination for centuries

- 6. This is what the world does with its strength: uses it to dominate the weak
- 7. That is NATURAL... but God calls us to be SUPERNATURAL

B. Christian Obligation: Strong Bearing the Weak

- 1. From the very beginning God intended human strength to serve what was below it
- 2. Adam was created and placed in the Garden to serve it and protect it
- 3. Man created in the image of God... using strength and power to nurture and protect
- 4. This is exactly how God is with all His immeasurable power... astonishingly gentle with us:

Isaiah 40:10-12 See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. ¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. ¹² Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance?

Amazing! Here is the God who with the breadth of His mighty hand marks off the heavens, yet He tenderly carries His people like little lambs

- 5. Paul is teaching in line with the consistent pattern of the Bible: strength and power are meant to serve and protect the weak... not dominate them

C. The Theology of Strength and Weakness

1. The word “weakness” here has a powerful heritage in the NT
2. Usually translated “sickness” or “frailty”, it relates to humanity in sin
3. All human beings are “weak” and “sick” because of sin

Romans 5:6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

Paul used the same word to describe our natural state in sin... weak, diseased, powerless, frail... and to describe Christ’s powerful saving work for us

4. This is precisely why Christ came into the world... to carry our weakness (same Greek word as used here by Paul)

Matthew 8:16-17 When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. ¹⁷ This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases."

Isaiah 53:5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

5. Jesus’ healing ministry was a visible picture of His spiritual work of salvation from the weakness and disease of sin itself
 - a. All human disease is a picture of weakness: Blind CAN’T see... Deaf CAN’T hear... Paralyzed CAN’T walk... Mute CAN’T talk... Dead CAN’T live... or do anything
 - b. Christ’s healings are a picture of God’s power made perfect when combined with human weakness
6. Even after salvation, we remain weak because of the flesh
7. Christ as our faithful and merciful high priest sympathizes with our weaknesses since He Himself experienced bodily temptations
8. However, someday we’ll be transformed eternally from weakness to power
9. The Apostle Paul, though he includes himself among the strong frequently speaks of his own weaknesses
10. Actually in 2 Corinthians he boasts of his weaknesses as strengths because they free him from self-confidence and enable him to rely totally on Christ

2 Corinthians 12:10 ... when I am weak, then I am strong.

11. Paul seems to say the weaknesses of others ought to bind the church together even more powerfully... “When WE are weak then WE are strong”

D. Who Are the Strong and Weak Here?

1. The strong are the mature Christians... who keep everything in balance
Gospel freedom... Gospel purity... Gospel unity
2. Notice that Paul includes himself here: **“WE who are strong...”**

E. Bearing the Weak

1. Not merely “bear with” = put up with
2. Rather to bear as in to carry the failings of the weak

[NASB] Romans 15:1 Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves.

3. Picture a strong man carrying an invalid who is unable to walk for himself;

In March of 1942, the Japanese Imperial Army was in the process of conquering the Philippines. They captured some 70,000 American and Filipino troops in Bataan and forced them to march horrendous conditions over 65 miles to a railway. The heat was scorching; many of the soldiers had tropical fevers or dysentery.

The Japanese guards refused them water, and the diseased men began to stagger, fall behind, or collapse in the searing heat -which only infuriated the guards further. The Japanese guards began regularly beating, shooting or bayoneting any stragglers. Soon, the Americans learned to help their wounded buddies along, lest they be cavalierly discarded like so much trash alongside the ditches lining the road.

The strong had to help the weak, or they would not make it.

So it is with the church of Jesus Christ. NOT ONE CAN BE LEFT BEHIND!!

We must ALL finish the race, and we are responsible to strengthen and help anyone who feels they cannot make it another step.

And sometimes we are the strong giving the help to the weak...

And sometimes we are the weak receiving help from the strong:

4. Amazing: If the weak are now Jews who have been unable to give up their Old Covenant lifestyle, they are the same ones who “bear” or carry the Gentiles in the Olive Tree analogy earlier

Romans 11:18 You[Gentiles] do not support [lit. bear] the root, but the root supports [bears] you.

They carried you to salvation in Christ, now you need to carry them to maturity in the New Covenant!!

How mutual is this support we give to one another

Sometimes we carry someone else; sometimes they carry us!!

Paul's vision here is of a perfectly united church, with the strong bearing the weak... so that all of them advance together in the Christian life

The issue then is for the strong to stop seeking to please themselves

II. A Life of Pleasing God by Pleasing Others

Romans 15:1-3 We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. ² Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. ³ For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."

Theme: Who are you living to please?

A. Our Great Struggle with Pleasure

1. America a pleasure crazed nation

- a. Industrial revolution created multiple labor-saving devices
- b. That resulted in abundance of free time and many ways to spend it
- c. Recreation became the purpose for everything... living for the weekend
- d. Result: extreme selfishness, every person relentlessly seeks his own pleasure

2. Some of the pleasure craze has entered the church

A.W. Tozer: The abuse of a harmless thing is the essence of sin. The growth of the amusement phase of human life to such fantastic proportions is a portent, a threat to the souls of modern men. It has been built into a multimillion dollar racket with greater power over human minds and human character than any other educational influence on earth.

... For centuries the Church stood solidly against every form of worldly entertainment, recognizing it for what it was—a device for wasting time, a refuge from the disturbing voice of conscience, a scheme to divert attention from moral accountability.

For this she got herself abused roundly by the sons of this world. But of late she has become tired of the abuse and has given over the struggle. She appears to have decided

that if she cannot conquer the great god Entertainment she may as well join forces with him and make what use she can of his powers.

So, today we have the astonishing spectacle of millions of dollars being poured into the unholy job of providing earthly entertainment for the so-called sons of heaven.

- a. Willow Creek, the ultimate “seeker sensitive church” has been leading the way in using pleasure and entertainment to attract unbelievers to a consideration of spiritual things; they have a Food Court and an Cappucino bar, and set up their whole Sunday experience around pleasing everyone who comes
- b. Granger Community Church in Granger, Indiana: organize sermon series around the hottest summer movies; give away iPods in worship services; live rock bands with laser light shows every Sunday
 - Tertullian, during the Roman persecution: The blood of martyrs is seed for the church
 - Church growth movement: Entertainment is seed for the church
- c. But serious problems:
- d. Problem in evangelism on non-Christians
- e. Problem in discipleship of Christians

"When amusement is necessary to get people to listen to the gospel there will be failure. This is not the method of Christ. To form an organization and provide all kinds of entertainment for young people, in order that they may come to the Bible classes, is to be foredoomed to failure." --G. Campbell Morgan

f. Danger: addicted to pleasure, pleasing ourselves, we forget to serve Christ

B. The Issue is Not Pleasure Itself: All Pleasure Comes from God

1. God does all things for His own good pleasure

Psalm 115:3 Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.

2. God is a God of delight, joy, rejoicing, and celebrating [Prodigal Son]
3. Our own salvation brings Him great pleasure

Luke 12:32 "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

4. Salvation itself culminates in pleasure at God's right hand

Psalm 16:11 You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

C. But Worldly Pleasure is a Danger to the Flesh

1. Idolatry: turning the good gifts of God into gods that replace Him

Romans 1:25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator-- who is forever praised. Amen.

2. Warnings against pleasure

(RSV) James 5:1, 5 Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. ... You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.

2 Timothy 3:4 lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God

Hebrews 11:25-26 [Moses] chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time.

3. John Piper's solution: to realize that God is better than all of His gifts

John Piper: The burden of my ministry is to make plain to others that "The steadfast love [of the Lord] is better than life" (Psalm 63:3). And if it is better than life, it is better than all that life in this world offers. This means that what satisfies is not the gifts of God, but the glory of God--the glory of his love, the glory of his power, the glory of his wisdom, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. When David said to the Lord: "In your presence there is fullness of joy, in your right hand are pleasures for evermore," (Psalm 16:11), he meant that nearness to God himself is the only all-satisfying experience of the universe.

D. The Issue Is Not: Pleasing Others vs. Pleasing God

1. That is NOT the contrast Paul is making
2. People pleasing in that sense is actually a great sin!!

Galatians 1:10 Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.

3. It is one of the greatest dangers of the legalistic life... a life on display for human judges... it is a deadly life that leads to hypocrisy and kills faith

E. The Issue Is: Pleasing Ourselves vs. Pleasing Others

1. Selfishness is the enemy of the Christian unity Paul is seeking
2. Christian freedoms can be selfish things... selfish pleasures

3. Paul is calling on Christians to be willing to please others for their sakes

vs. 2 *Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.*

4. It is the call to deny personal pleasures and freedoms and privileges for the sake of Christian unity

5. It is the call of the cross

Luke 9:23-24 Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.

6. It is the call of the missionary life

1 Corinthians 9:19 Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.

Illus.: Moravian missionaries who voluntarily sold themselves into slavery in the West Indies to reach other slaves on the sugar plantations. They were not living lives to please themselves, but gave up their freedoms to save others

In the same way Paul in 1 Corinthians 9 lists many freedoms he has as an apostle: the freedom to take a believing wife, to receive pay for the ministry, to eat and drink and act like a man freed by the gospel of grace; He could please himself in many ways... but he chose not to use any of those freedoms to win as many as possible to Christ

III. Christ the Ultimate Example

A. Paul Uses Christ as Ultimate Example

1. Christ the powerful one; We the weak ones
2. Christ used His power to serve us, and to save us

B. Christ Did Not Please Himself

Vs. 3 For even Christ did not please himself

1. First, do not misunderstand: Christ DELIGHTED to do the work of God and to save us

Psalm 40:7-8 Then I said, "Behold, I come; In the scroll of the book it is written of me. ⁸ I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart."

Hebrews 12:2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Do not think of Christ as reluctant or opposed to the will of the Father or the salvation of the world... actually He delighted in it

2. Above all things, though, He was setting an example of putting God's pleasure above His own

John 6:38-39 For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.

This does not mean that it WASN'T CHRIST'S WILL to save those the Father gave Him, but rather that He was a "man under orders" carrying out the will of one above Him

This attitude was perfected in the prayer in Gethsemane, when Christ did not seek to please Himself but the One who sent Him:

Matthew 26:39 Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

3. Secondly, in the sense of self-indulgent and selfish pleasure, He never pleased Himself
4. Paul says "even Christ" did not please Himself
 - a. If anyone had the right to please Himself it was Christ
 - b. Christmas hymn "I Wonder as I Wonder"

**IF JESUS HAD WANTED FOR ANY WEE THING,
A STAR IN THE SKY, OR A BIRD ON THE WING,
OR ALL OF GOD'S ANGELS IN HEAV'N FOR TO SING,
HE SURELY COULD HAVE IT, 'CAUSE HE WAS THE KING.**

- c. He had every right to sit as a Turkish sultan and be waited on hand and foot; Christ alone in all human history deserved it
- d. But Christ totally rejected this selfish way of life and embraced the downward path of total servanthood and suffering for the benefit of others

Mark 10:45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Note the same word "even"... just as Paul points out

Vs. 3 For even Christ did not please himself

Christ had the right to be served, but He rejected that right and displayed what all powerful, authoritative, mature, healthy people are to do with their power, their authority, their maturity, their healthy: **SERVE THE WEAK AND NEEDY**

5. Christ's incarnation a choice He made not to please Himself
6. Christ's miracle working power was not to please Himself
 - a. He could have used His miracle working power to feed Himself in the desert
 - b. He could have used His miracle working power to save Himself from the cross
7. Christ's teaching ministry was not to please Himself
 - a. Christ was the greatest teacher that ever lived, for no man ever spoke like this man
 - b. He could have made a great name for Himself with His teachings
 - c. BUT instead He willingly taught difficult things that turned people off and made them enraged... like John 6 (**Eat my flesh and drink my blood**)
8. Christ's crucifixion was not to please Himself

When He accepted the cup of wrath and condemnation for our sins, it wasn't to please Himself

9. Christ's resurrection was not to please Himself

Although I'm certain Christ got great joy out of destroying death, yet it was not ultimately to please Himself that He rose... but to bring us eternal life

C. Christ's Focus: Accepting Abuse Meant for God and God's People

Vs. 3 For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."

1. Psalm 69... a clearly Messianic Psalm, with many prophecies about Christ
2. John 2 quotes this same verse when Jesus was hated for cleansing the temple

Psalm 69:9 for zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.

3. For love for the Father's glory, the Son cleansed the temple; then He stood and publicly took the abuse that action produced... their hatred was ultimately for God
4. This sense of total unity between the Father and the Son is then extended to Christ's relationship with His Body, the church

5. If you insulted a Christian, you were really insulting Christ

Acts 9:4-5 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

6. The picture here is one of unity

- a. Christ did not please Himself but was willing to inconvenience Himself and suffer greatly for the glory of the Father
- b. Christ likewise did not please Himself but took our weakness and infirmities on Himself in His incarnation, His healings, His teachings, and His death on the cross
- c. Therefore we who are strong ought not to live for our own pleasure but rather for the upbuilding of the church

IV. Application

A. Assess Yourself

1. On the issue of the strong and the weak:
 - a. Do you see yourself as weak apart from Christ?
 - b. Do you recognize that any strength and ability you have comes from Christ for the upbuilding of the church?
 - c. Do you realize that sometimes you play the role of the weak one receiving help from the body and other time you play the role of the strong one bringing resources to help the weak?
2. Are you living a life that is self-seeking and pleasure-oriented?
 - a. Are you being dragged along in the stream of American pleasure-craze?
 - b. Can you see in yourself a principle of denying yourself, taking up your cross and following Christ?
 - c. Is it the regular pattern of your life to say no to yourself for the spiritual benefit of others?
 - d. Do you use your strength and ability to serve others or to dominate others?

B. Look at Your Giving Patterns

1. Yes, start with money

2 Corinthians 8:14-15 *At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality,¹⁵ as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."*

2. But also look at the overall generosity of your life
 - a. Are you being lavish and generous with your spiritual gifts?
 - b. Is there the principle of sacrifice in your life?
 - c. Are you being hospitable? Opening your home?
3. Do you live to give or to you live to take?

Acts 20:34-35 *You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions.³⁵ In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*

C. Put Yourself Fully in God's Hands for the Upbuilding of the Church

1. Be willing to deny yourself the Christian freedoms that are yours so that you can build up someone else
2. Resist the tide of selfish entertainment
3. Learn the lessons of Christ: For even He didn't please Himself

D. Live for the Encouragement of a Weak Brother or Sister

Hebrews 12:12-13 *Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.¹³ "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.*