

14. Romans 15-16



Romans 15:1-6

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbour for the good purpose of building up the neighbour. For the Messiah did not please himself; but, as it is written, 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me' (Psalm 69:9). For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accord with the Messiah Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus the Messiah.

Because Paul agrees that the food regulations are not in themselves essential to obedience to God, he identifies with the 'strong'. In doing so, however, he makes the point that if they really are 'strong' they should be able to endure patiently the burden placed upon them by the 'weak', and to help the 'weak' to carry their burden. As he said elsewhere: 'Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ' (Galatians 6:2). We have the example of Jesus who 'took our infirmities and bore our diseases' (Matthew 8:17).

Paul is keen to 'build up the church' (1 Corinthians 14:12). He is clear on how this is to be done: 'Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other' (1 Corinthians 10:24). He adds: 'just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of the Messiah' (1 Corinthians 10:33 - 11:1). He wants to see the community built up for its internal harmony and for its mission to the wider community. He therefore appeals to those who are able that they reach out to the weak in love with a view to making them stronger and more able to contribute to the community's life and mission. As he wrote earlier: 'Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding' (14:19). This is a constant theme in Paul's letters. He made the same appeal to the Thessalonians: 'encourage one another and build up each other' (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Romans 15:7-13

Welcome one another, therefore, just as the Messiah has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that the Messiah has become a servant (διάκονος) of the circumcised on behalf of the truth (ἀληθεία) of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, ‘Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name’ (Psalm 18:49); and again he says, ‘Rejoice, o Gentiles, with his people’ (Deuteronomy 32:43); and again, ‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him’ (Psalm 117:1); and again Isaiah says, ‘The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope’ (Isaiah 11:10). May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:14-15

I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another. Nevertheless on some points I have written to you rather boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God

In these verses Paul begins the concluding section of his letter. He reiterates themes found in the Introduction (1:1-17). His statement here concerning his confidence in the goodness and in the knowledge of the Roman community reminds us of his earlier statement: 'I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world' (1:8). His acknowledging that he has been rather forthright in some of his statements reminds us of his talking about 'sharing with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you – or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine' (1:11-12). He added that he was eager 'to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome' (1:15).

Here and in the following verses he speaks of the ‘gospel’ (see also 15:19,20) – a word that kept recurring in the Introduction (see 1:1,9,15,16). Here and in the following verses he speaks of his apostolic commission (see also 15:18,27). We recall that he introduced himself as ‘called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God’ (1:1), and added: ‘we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves’ (1:5-6; see also 1:13).

Romans 15:16

the grace given me by God to be a minister (λειτουργός) of the Messiah Jesus to the Gentiles to carry out the priestly service (ιερουργεω) of the gospel of God, so that the offering (προσφορὰ) of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified (ἁγιαζω) by the Holy Spirit.

Paul is filling out what he meant when he wrote in the Introduction that by ‘announcing the gospel of God’s Son’, he was ‘worshipping (λατρεύω) God with my spirit’ (1:9). Like the priests of the Jewish cult, for whom the word ‘λειτουργός’ is reserved in the Greek Bible (see Exodus 28;35,43; 29:30), Paul is offering sacrifices to God.

Paul urged the Roman community: ‘I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice (θυσία), holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (λατρεία)’(12:1). Paul’s ministry calls him to be a priest in this community, and they are his offering. He sees his ministry of preaching the gospel as an act of divine service in the temple which is the church.

Romans 15:17-19

In the Messiah Jesus, then, I have reason to boast of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what the Messiah has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God

We have here one of the rare occasions on which Paul speaks of the ‘**signs and wonders**’ that the Spirit of God has worked through him. Another was in a previous letter written from Macedonia or Illyricum to Corinth in which he reminds the Corinthians that: ‘the signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, signs and wonders and mighty works’ (2 Corinthians 12:12; compare 1 Thessalonians 1:5).

Luke records the miraculous healing of the crippled man in Lystra (Acts 14:10), and the miraculous liberation of the slave girl in Philippi (Acts 16:18). Luke also tells us that ‘God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that when the handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them’ (Acts 19:11-12).

The greatest sign and the greatest source of wonder is, of course, the gospel itself ‘**the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes**’ (1:16; compare 1 Corinthians 2:4).

Romans 15:19-22

From Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of the Messiah. Thus I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news, not where the Messiah has already been named, so that I do not build on someone else's foundation,²¹ but as it is written, 'Those who have never been told of him shall see, and those who have never heard of him shall understand' (Isaiah 52:15). This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you.

Paul mentions the wide sweep of his apostolic work and makes the point that he understands his mission as being that of a pioneer (compare 2 Corinthians 10:14-16). He supports his understanding with a text from Isaiah.

Romans 15:23-24

Now, with no further place for me in these regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you when I go to Spain. For I do hope to see you on my journey and to be sent on by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little while.

Now that he has completed his mission in the East he plans to go to Spain via Rome. He mentioned in his Introduction that he was praying ‘that by God’s will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you’ (1:10). He looks forward to their company, their prayer and their support as he ventures out to the western fringes of the empire.

Romans 15:25-27

At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things.

Paul has a lot to say about the collection for Jerusalem in his Corinthian correspondence (see 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 and 2 Corinthians 8-9). Here he speaks of it in the same terms as a work of ‘**ministering** (διακονεω) **to the saints**’. It is something which he is doing under the direction of the risen Jesus. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he was not sure that he would need to take the collection to Jerusalem himself (see 1 Corinthians 16:4). He now knows that he must go.

Romans 15:28-33

So, when I have completed this, and have sealed (σφραγίζω) to them this fruit, I will set out by way of you to Spain; and I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of the Messiah. I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus the Messiah and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in earnest prayer to God on my behalf, that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. The God of peace be with all of you. Amen.

Paul is clearly anxious about his impending journey to Jerusalem, and with good reason, as we discover from Luke's account of what happened there. He knows of the close connections between the Roman church and the church in Jerusalem, and he is hoping that the Roman community may pray for the success of his mission, and that perhaps they may be in a position to exert some influence on his behalf.

Using the image of stamping with a seal, he tells them that he needs to ensure that the Jerusalem community knows that this monetary assistance is a sign from the Gentile churches of their solidarity with their Jewish brothers and sisters in their need. It is clear from Paul's words here that he sees the collection as one way in which he can help to bind his churches to the mother church in Judea, and to show the Jewish Christians that his mission to the Gentiles does not imply a break with them, as some were saying.

The ‘**unbelievers**’ about whom he is concerned are probably two groups. There are the Jews who see him as an apostate (see Acts 14:2; 20:19). There are also certain Jewish Christians who have been against him from the beginning, claiming that his gospel is defective because of his failure to insist on full obedience to the law.

In Luke’s account of what happened to Paul in Jerusalem, the collection is mentioned almost as an aside (see Acts 24:17). Luke does not say whether his offering was rejected or accepted.

As in his introduction (see 1:10), so here, Paul shows his constant desire to do God’s will (compare Acts 18:21).

Romans 16:1-2

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

Cenchreae is Corinth's port on the Saronic Gulf, which opened into the Aegean and the east (see Acts 18:18). Paul refers to Phoebe as a '**deacon**' (διάκονος), indicating that she carries out a special ministry which the community acknowledges as being authorised and graced by the risen Jesus. He refers to her also as a '**benefactor**' (προστάτις): a person whose status in society enabled her to support others materially and in other ways in the public life of the city.

Romans 16:3-5

Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in the Messiah Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house.

Paul begins to greet members of the Roman community. He greets twenty-four by name, beginning with Prisca and Aquila. This list of greetings helps explain some aspects of the present letter. While, as mentioned in the introduction, the community itself was not one that Paul had founded or visited, he had met and worked with, or had heard about and knew by name, a number of its members. He was not writing to the community as a complete stranger.

Prisca and her husband Aquila were among those banished from Rome in 49AD by decree of the emperor Claudius. Paul met them the following year when he made his first visit to Corinth. Aquila was originally from Pontus and worked with leather like Paul. They 'worked with' Paul also in his Christian ministry (Acts 18:2-3). When Paul left Corinth in 52AD, they travelled with him to Ephesus, where they continued their ministry (see Acts 18:3). Writing to Corinth from Ephesus, Paul sends greetings from them 'together with the church in their house' (1 Corinthians 16:19). They are now back in Rome, having returned, perhaps, when the edict of Claudius terminated with his death in 54AD. Perhaps they did so with Paul's encouragement, to help prepare the way for Paul's own visit (see Acts 19:21). As in Corinth, so in Rome, they are offering hospitality to the community in their house. Because they were Jews, such a gathering was permitted under Roman law.

Romans 16:5-10

Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for the Messiah. Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you. Greet Andronicus and Junia my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in the Messiah before I was. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in the Messiah, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in the Messiah.

Junia may be the wife of Andronicus. Paul identifies them as ‘**apostles**’: that is, as people commissioned by the Risen Jesus through a local church as itinerant missionaries. The close connections between the church in Jerusalem and the church in Rome, and the fact that they were Christians prior to Paul, suggests that they may have come from Jerusalem.

Romans 16:10-16

Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my relative Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother — a mother to me also. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

Paul greets the Christians in the household of Aristobulus who may have been the brother of Herod Agrippa I and a friend and confidant of the emperor Claudius. If he brought Christian slaves with him to Rome this is another way in which Christianity could have come to the city.

Romans 16:17-23

I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offences, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them. For such people do not serve our Lord the Messiah, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded. For while your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, I want you to be wise in what is good and guileless in what is evil. The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus the Messiah be with you.

Timothy, my co-worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason (from Thessalonica, Acts 17:5-9?) and Sosipater (from Beroea, Acts 20:4?), my relatives. I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord. Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church (1 Corinthians 1:14), greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer (Acts 19:22), and our brother Quartus, greet you.

Romans 16:25-27

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus the Messiah, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith — to the only wise God, through Jesus the Messiah, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

Most ancient manuscripts place these verses here, but they appear after 15:33 in our oldest papyrus manuscript, and after 14:23 in other ancient manuscripts.