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Series: Romans: The Just Shall Live by Faith
Message: The Examples of Jesus

Transcribed Message
November 26, 2023
Romans 15:1-3

There is a children's song back in my memory bank that we would sing as a kid in Sunday school and it went by the acrostic JOY: Jesus, others, and you. Those of you that can remember that song can join me as we sing it together. Maybe we won't sing it but these were the words: "Jesus, others, and you. What a wonderful way to spell joy. (Anybody remember the song? Is it just me?) Jesus, others, and you. What a wonderful way to spell joy. Jesus, others, and you in the life of each girl and each boy. J is for Jesus for he has first place. O is for others you meet face-to-face. Y is for you. In whatever you do, put yourself third and spell joy." There's actually an organization now called "I Am Second". I don't know that the apostle Paul sang the song. I don't think he knew anything about the organization "I Am Second" but I do know this. He talked about this principle a lot. A lot of the letters that he wrote to churches he underscored this very truth: Jesus, others, and you. Putting yourself last, putting other people first. As I look at that, it seems to me that you see this theme in Romans 12 when he says in verse 3 and starts right off almost the 12th chapter after he challenges us with regard to offering ourselves as living sacrifices. He says don't think more highly of yourself than you should think. Then you get into chapter 13 and he says don't forget that you owe as an obligation to love each other. Then we've seen repeatedly in this 14th chapter which is talking about freedom and liberty but it's all underscored with the idea that you're putting yourself under others. You're serving other people. Your heart is for other people and not for yourself. I look at that and I just think to myself he's basically saying Jesus is Lord so submit to him, love others and put them up before yourself as you serve them, and put yourself last. In effect, you spell joy, don't you?

This morning and in the opening three verses of this 15th chapter this is what we want to see. Never think that limiting your freedom for others is in any way unreasonable. If we ever go there, if we ever think this is crazy, why would I put myself

in this third position so continuously? I think he basically says to us if you ever think that way, just think of what Christ did for you and what he did for me.

Look at those principles that we covered to this point, ten of them to be exact, in which all the way through this 14th chapter we've been challenged to underscore these truths: welcoming each other, not looking down on each other, not judging, letting our conscience in fact be our guide (not somebody else's conscience but our conscience), taking into account that we're going to give an account. We're going to stand before God. Don't do spiritual harm to your brother or sister. Always be mindful of that. The kingdom of God is not external things. Don't be focused and consumed with that which is external. Remember that serving others is the most important thing. Building each other up. Don't flaunt your liberties and then of course live by faith. We come to these opening verses and there's yet another principal and Lord willing we'll see yet another one as we go forward, but in these verses we want to see this principle this morning. number 11. We must follow the example of Christ.

Follow the example of Christ. We've seen this before and we've commented on it in other places as we've gone through different books of the Bible. But this is one of those unfortunate chapter breaks, when you come to chapter 14 and then you come into chapter 15. In fact, if you have a new American Standard Bible, probably the very first word in verse 1 is the word "now". There is a conjunction here. It is not translated in the age of the English Standard Version, but it indicates that there is something that Paul wants us to reflect on. Now. He wants us to pause and think and just remember that what he is going to say in these opening verses of chapter 15 is in effect a summary of sorts of everything that he has said to this point. It's a good time just to stop and summarize what all that Paul has said.

The very first thing we need to recognize in that summary idea is that the subject matter hasn't changed. We're at a different chapter in 15 but the subject matter of chapter 14 is going to carry right over into these opening verses. We understand that when God gave us his word it did not, as I have said 100 times, fall from heaven nicely, neatly leather bound for us to pick up in our own language and read it. It was a wonderful, miraculous, beautiful process that God gave us to give us his word. But when his word was originally given, there were no chapters. Those did not come until

1205. There were no verse markers. That didn't come until 1551. Another thing to be thankful for on this Thanksgiving weekend. Another thing to be thankful for that we have chapters and we have verses and we have the Bible in our own language, so that when I say to you let's turn to Romans 15 and let's look at the first three verses, you're not spending most of the time trying to find your way to the 15th chapter of Romans in an unmarked Bible with no chapters and no verses. But the point of all that is simply to say this. This chapter break indicates a break of thought that isn't really there in Paul's mind. So we're going to pick up from the 14th chapter and go right into the 15th and in this first verse there's a lot of repetition. That is purposeful.

That is what Paul wants. Look at the first verse. "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves." In many respects, that is just continuing on what he has been talking about in the 14th chapter and it's a great summary of it and it's a repetition of what he has just said. Why do we repeat ourselves? When we mean to. Usually we repeat ourselves for emphasis. We repeat ourselves because we think something is important. Line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little there a little. That's what the word of God does. It often summarizes its teaching and it often repeats its teaching because it's important. These are things that clearly the Spirit of God wants us to learn. Paul wants us to learn. For Paul and for the Holy Spirit, this is important. He wants us to understand that what he has talked about in chapter 14 is still what he is talking about in chapter 15. So we have an emphasis on the importance and clarity. It calls for some self-examination.

That's what's in view here this first verse. Paul again mentions the strong and the weak. When I just said that Paul again mentions the strong and the weak, that actually is not a true statement. What is not true about that statement? Paul again mentions the strong and the weak. What is not true about it is this is the first time that Paul has actually used the word strong. This is the first time he has identified himself with the strong by saying I'm one of the strong. Up until this point it's always been by inference. He has talked about the weak, but this is the first time he has actually used this word strong. He is again identifying with those who are in this category of being strong. Their conscience is strong. Their convictions are strong. Their faith is strong. Their understanding of Christian liberty is strong. Their understanding of freedom in Christ is

strong through the word of God. Now for the first time he says to them I am one of the strong with you. He has said that before without using the exact word but now he's telling us that's what he is.

A couple of things when I read that come to mind. This matter of self-examination. Self-examination is a good thing. It's a necessary thing. It's an important thing. It's something that we should regularly do. We should regularly ask ourselves questions with regard to this matter of our own walk with God, in our own spiritual maturity, and where we are as to whether we're strong or whether we're weak. As our children grew in the three homes that we lived in, each place we had markings on the wall. As they grew, the marks would be the indicators of their growing. Of course, it was always encouraging to them to see those marks go up the wall. Why do we never do anything like that spiritually? We're mindful of the need and the importance of physical self-evaluation and physical growth, but we need to be more mindful of that in the spiritual realm as well. Hopefully at this point in 2023 we can look back and say I think I am in a better place spiritually in my walk with God than I was in January 2023. There should be that sense of self examination and evaluation.

I think with that we have to acknowledge what Paul is saying here is that not every believer is in the same place. Not every believer is in the same place. That is the whole point that he's been making in the 14th chapter and now into the 15th. We're at the same place with regard to salvation. In salvation everybody is the same. at the foot of the cross it is level. Everybody is standing in the righteousness of Christ if they have put their faith and trust in Christ. As to our salvation, absolutely everybody is the same. but as to sanctification, he is making a clear distinction here. There are those who are weak in their faith, in their conviction, in their conscience. There are those who are strong. In 1 Corinthians chapter 3, Paul underscores that truth when he says because you're babies in Christ. You're spiritual infants. They weren't supposed to be spiritual infants at this point any longer but they still were. He said I wish you were mature. I wish that you were spiritual. That's a checkpoint for us as well.

John in his first epistle gives us three categories. He says there are those of you that are little children. There are those of you that are young men. There are those of you that are fathers. He is not speaking in gender language. He is speaking in terms of

spiritual growth and development. We all start off at the same place, don't we? We all start off as spiritual infants but then we progress, John says, to where we're now young men and young women in the faith. Then we get to a point where we're fathers in the sense that we are maturing and growing in our walk with God. Paul and John both speak to that in that regard.

So you say as you look at this, I am one of the strong. My conscience has been informed by the word of God. I understand that I have freedom. I understand what it means to walk in liberty in Christ. I consider myself one of the strong. What does Paul say? Okay good, here is another obligation for you. Here is another obligation. This is a reminder of our calling as those who are strong. When Paul says I am one with you, I am one of the strong, he's laying now an obligation. The key to unity in the body of Christ falls to the strong. The key to unity in the body of Christ falls to the strong. There are expectations. We've said this before in the 14th chapter. There are expectations that we have for our children as they grow. We certainly expect a lot more from our children when they're teenagers and when they're young adults than we do when they're in elementary school and young children. The same thing is true spiritually. Paul is grappling with this issue in the church at Rome that has divided itself up over opinions. He is not challenging those who are strong. If you consider yourself one of the strong, he says there's another obligation, a greater obligation on you with regard to unity in the body.

When you look at that at first verse – we who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak – where do you suppose the word “obligation” is in the structure of that sentence? Knowing what you know about the apostle Paul, where do you think the word “obligation” is in the Greek text? It is the very first word. In the Greek structure of this first verse, the word “obligation” is the very first word. He is basically repeating principles from chapter 14 as we said. He is summarizing everything he said in chapter 14 and he literally starts off verse 1 of chapter 15 with the word “obligation”. You have an obligation as one who is strong. It's emphatic. He's underscoring the fact that you who are mature have a greater obligation with regard to this matter of unity. The word literally means to owe someone something. It's a great word. You who are strong, you owe the weak something.

One of the things you owe them is not to look down on them, not to despise them, not to judge them, not to flaunt your freedom. All of those things that he has already said. Psalm 133 verse 1 the psalmist says, "Behold! How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity." That is what makes the gospel attractive. What would be attractive about a church that is quarreling and bickering and judgmental and looking at each other with contempt? There would be nothing attractive about that at all. Here is Paul saying to those who are strong: you lead the way.

What is the application that he intends for us to see with regard to this obligation? There are two things that he lays on those who are strong, two things that he wants them to do. The first is a positive and it is to bear with. We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak. What comes to mind when you think about bearing with the failings of the weak? You're going to bear with someone. If someone says to you I want you to bear with this situation or this circumstance or this person, let me tell you what it does not mean. That might be an easier way to start. What comes to mind when you hear we are to bear with those who are weak? Well, it doesn't mean just to tolerate them. It doesn't mean to grudgingly go along with whatever their needs might be. It doesn't mean to look at them in some condescending way with contempt. We might think when we're bearing with somebody that would be the idea, but that's not the idea at all.

How do you deal with those who disagree with you? that's the context of this discussion in the church at Rome. We know when Paul wrote the book of Corinth how they were dealing with it. They were dividing themselves up in all of these different groups and each was laying claim to something as opposed to the other. Clearly that's not what he would have in mind. We know from the Gospels what the Pharisees did in bearing with other people. What did the Pharisees do as they would bear with other people? They would bully them. They would intimidate them. They would look with great condescension and cause humiliation upon people who disagreed with them. Paul is saying this word "bear with" literally is the gospel and speaks of somebody coming along and picking up a gurney and helping somebody who can't walk. That's how it's used in the Gospel of Luke. There are those who were bearing the lame man. They

came and they picked him up. They helped in that way. That's what he is saying here. There's to be that kind of support and that kind of help.

In Galatians chapter 6 listen to the first two verses where we have the same idea: "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual ... (There you have it. You who are mature. You who are strong. You who are spiritual) ... should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself lest you too be tempted." And then he says this same word. "Bear with one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." Bear with, come alongside, lift up, support, carry, encourage. All of those words come to mind.

The failings here of the weak. What are the failings? The failings are not moral failings. The failings of the weak are dealing with their conscience that has not yet been fully informed by the word of God. They aren't yet at that point of maturity where they understand what it means to have this kind of freedom, to have this kind of liberty in Christ. As they're trying to decide whether they can eat meat that now no longer under the list of "don't eat" from the law to now under the New Covenant. They haven't arrived at that point yet. Paul describes that as the failings of the weak. It is their conscience that yet needs to be trained. He is not telling the strong to embrace the view of the weak. He is telling the strong to love the weak and to lead the way in providing unity.

Now the negative part of this is bearing with. We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Here's the negative side. Positively? Bear with. Negatively? Don't please yourself. I would suggest as you look at that this is one of the most practical and powerful principles that we find in the New Testament and in Scripture in general. This idea of don't please yourself. The easiest thing that I do is to please myself. The hardest thing that I do is not please myself. This idea that we need to teach people to love themselves, this idea that self-love is not inherent and not a part of who we are misses the point of Scripture. We inherently do love ourselves. We inherently do look out for ourselves. I'm making the distinction that there certainly is this matter of low self-esteem. Somebody can have a very poor view of themselves in that sense. But we all just by nature love ourselves and love to put ourselves first. Here Paul is telling us to do something totally contrary to how we naturally think. We are to in fact not please ourselves. It's kind of right where we

started. The joy principle. Jesus, others, and you. What a wonderful way to spell joy. A principal that would change the life of the church is right there. Don't please yourself. You want to be a part of a group that is committed and encouraging unity at Covenant Community Church. Don't be pleasing yourself. Put other people before yourself. You want to see your family life change dramatically? Have every person in your family look out for the interests of others before themselves. You want to see your marriage totally revolutionized? Adapt the position that you're going to bear with, you're going to encourage, you're going to lift up your spouse. You're not going to seek to please yourself. It's a relational game changer on every level. Where you work, where you serve, where you live. There isn't anything that will be more impactful than right there. Put other people before yourself.

Now look at the second verse. There's a broadening of this principle I think. "Let each of us please his neighbor for his good to build him up." We might ask the question: who is your neighbor? I think in the immediate context obviously it is the weak but I almost wonder if Paul isn't wanting to broaden this out a little bit more than that and just simply challenge us with this broader application that our neighbor is any number of people that we may encounter in our day-to-day life. It's relationships in a more general sense. It just speaks to how it is that we view and how it is that we treat and how it is that we see people. What Paul says to us is let each of us please his neighbor for his good to build him up. There's a command here in that second verse, and that command is an imperative. It's a command that is found in the word "please". Back in Romans chapter 8 verse 8, Paul had said that it is impossible to please God when we're walking in the flesh. When you're in the flesh you cannot please God. You can't be in harmony with God and be pleasing yourself. That is the point that he made in Romans 8. It is with the idea of harmony. Amos 3:3. "How can two walk together unless they be in agreement?" Just think of a three-legged race. How are those two people successful? When they're walking in harmony and they're walking in unison. They're making this happen by working together and that's the idea here.

What does this mean though when he says to us let each of us please his neighbor for his good to build him up? What does it mean to please your neighbor? Again, it doesn't mean to be a people pleaser. It doesn't mean to be a people pleaser.

We've already encountered this back in the 14th chapter. Paul had talked previously about the fact that we live out this faith, we live out this life in which we are walking in the Spirit and we are going to be pleasing others and we're going to be pleasing God. But here he speaks to the fact that we are to please our neighbor and he is not calling us to be a people pleaser. The Bible condemns people pleasing. Living your life in such a way that you're always trying in some way to impress somebody or make yourself look better. That would be people pleasing. That is not what he's talking about here.

We hear today about something called contextualization. It's out there. Contextualization basically says I'm going to become like the world so I can reach the world. I'm going to become more like the world so I can reach the world. When Paul says you need to please your neighbor, is he saying to us in order to reach your neighbor you need to become more and more like your neighbor? You need to engage in the things that they are engaging in, and you need to do the things that they're doing because that's going to please them and then they will listen to you. you're going to contextualize the gospel and make it attractive. That is not what Paul is saying. He's not saying that as a Christ follower we contextualize the gospel in such a way that we look so much like the world that the world finds what we have attractive. That is happening increasingly in the church today. That is happening in our world today.

A case in point, and this is all public information so this is not anything out of order. Andy Stanley, who is the pastor of North Point Church in Atlanta, a large mega church with tens of thousands of people, hosted a conference just within the last couple of months. The conference was basically designed for parents of children with LBGTQ gender issues within their family. What a great idea! What a needed and necessary thing. We know that is a truth and reality that many Christian homes are facing increasingly today, so what would be wrong with the church putting forward a conference like that? Because what they ended up doing in my mind was to contextualize the gospel to say we want to so reach these people that we're going to become more like them. On the one hand, Andy said at some point in the conference homosexuality, lesbianism, all of this is sin. The Bible speaks against it. And then he introduced the main speakers for the conference who were both homosexual men in same-sex so-called marriages. How the world can you on the one hand say we're going

to make it possible to minister to children within the context of these families, which everybody should want to do that. That should be on all of our hearts to help make that happen. But then put before these families men who are in so-called marriages to talk about how to do this. That doesn't fit. There is a disconnect there. When Paul says to us be a people pleaser, that's not what he's saying. Don't find the lowest common denominator and be like the world so that the world will be attracted to you.

He is reminding us that liberty, while it's a good thing, is not the only thing. that was the point of Galatians chapter 1 when Paul confronted the Judaizers of chapter 1 in Galatians. They were messing with the gospel and Paul stood up to them. He wasn't a man pleaser at that point. He didn't say I see you have some good points. I see what you're trying to do. No, he totally rejected them and called them out for it. I think that's what we are looking at here. We're not to be people pleasers who care more about what the world thinks about us than what the Bible says or what God says. What does he have in mind? Ultimately, I think he's calling us to be a God pleaser. If I'm doing what pleases God, Paul's point is, if I'm loving God the way I should, then I'm loving my weaker brother or sister in Christ the way I should too. That's the consistency that he's calling us to. I am to build them up in their faith as I seek to walk in the truth of God's word. I give up my rights, I give up my freedoms. Verse 22. I keep those matters of opinions in certain settings to myself. I don't flaunt them. He is not calling us to live in fear of living out our freedom, but he is calling us to live in a way that we're not flaunting it.

So again, I just keep going back to the same illustration. If I'm in a public setting, there may be choices that I make about things that I do when I know there are weaker brothers or sisters there that could see me. I don't want my liberty. I'm not looking around in every public setting I may be at to make sure that there isn't a weaker brother or sister somewhere. I'm just mindful of the fact that if I know they're there I'm going to guard my liberty, my freedom. That's what he's talking about. Being a person who is pleasing God results then in someone who is building up a brother or sister.

Now you look at that and you say Paul, that sounds great, but when I think about that you're asking too much of me. You're literally asking me to give up my liberty. You're asking me to give up my freedom for a weaker brother or sister who might see

me and might stumble. I can't do that. What does Paul say to that? Really? Really? You can't give up a freedom or a liberty in a certain situation to be able to please God, to be able to build up a brother or sister and not to cause them to stumble or fall? That's what he does in verse 3. Look at what he says. There is no greater example. If we really think that it is going to be too hard for us to give up a freedom or liberty because we are willing to not have a weaker brother or sister stumble, then he says this in verse 3. "For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproach you fell on me'." True selflessness.

What is one of Paul's favorite words? It's right there in verse 3. The word "for". The word "for". Go back to Romans 14 and it is like every other verse begins with the word "for". Here he does it again. "For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproach you fell on me'." He just is saying here's verses 1 & 2 and now I'm explaining it. Verse 3. I'm illustrating it. Jesus came to do the Father's will. Psalm 40 verse 8. I have come to do your will, O my God. That is Jesus's life verse, I believe. It is what Paul says in Philippians 2 verses 5 through 8 that he gave up all of that for us, that he would do that for us. Compared to what Christ did for us, can we even begin to grasp right now what it is that Christ gave up in the glories of heaven to come to this earth? To take on human form and to live out his life among sinful people and give his life for us. Can we even begin to grasp what that means? I don't think we can and yet he did that for us. Paul's comparison is are you kidding me? You're struggling with getting up a liberty for the sake of a brother or sister in Christ in comparison to what Christ did for you? it's almost like Paul can't comprehend that kind of an argument is being put forward. It's so trifling, so insignificant, so small, so meaningless in the big picture of eternity. The kingdom of heaven is righteousness, peace, and joy. It's not food and drink. We said that back in verse 17 of the 14th chapter.

As always, the Holy Spirit had the perfect passage to illustrate that. That's what we see last in this messianic psalm. Psalm 69 is a messianic psalm. It is a psalm of David. It is one of the most quoted psalms in the New Testament. There are only two psalms that are quoted more than Psalm 69. Psalm 22 and Psalm 110. Psalm 69 is the third most quoted psalm and it is the second half of verse 3 when he says the reproaches of those who have approached you fell on me. That is an example to us of

Christ not pleasing himself, but in fact doing what he did for us. The willingness with which he went to the cross. The willingness with which he suffered these reproaches, these insults. It is the principle of the greater to the lesser. The greater is what Christ did for us. The lesser is what we're willing to do for a brother or sister in Christ, to yield our rights, to make certain that we don't harm but that we build up. It takes us right back to the beginning. Never think that limiting your freedom for others is in any way unreasonable. If we ever think that, if we ever have that come to mind, Paul says just think of what Christ did for you.

What do we take away? Let's not diminish Christ's great example for us because we can't get along with each other over such trivial matters. Whatever is on that list that we've looked at so many times, whenever we can pick out a point about what we disagree with the brother or sister in Christ on things that are opinions that the Scriptures don't speak of, those are trivial things. Those are minor things. Remember Jesus, others, and you.

The greatest demonstration of all of that of course is the cross. It is what Jesus did in his coming. Leaving the glory of heaven, coming to this earth, dying on the cross, why? Because all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord God. God extends that gift to you today. If you've never put your faith and trust in Christ as your Savior, that's the invitation that the cross is for each one of us. That's the invitation of the gospel. What Christ did for us he did so that we could have harmony with God, that we could live with him forever.

Let's pray together. Father God, we thank you this morning for the glory of the gospel. We thank you for the glory of what Christ did for us. We thank you for this amazing example, Father, of Christ giving himself so fully and completely to us through the love that he showed for us on the cross, the giving of his life in making payment for sin. Father, we ask even now in these closing moments that your Holy Spirit would open hearts to understand and believe this gospel by faith and trust in Christ alone by faith alone would receive the forgiveness of sin and the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray, amen.