**Guideline for Fellowship**

Text: Romans 15:1-13

**Introduction:** We are considering the first section of chapter 15 but we do need to remember that it belongs with and should be understood in light of what the preceding chapter taught. It is concerned with the believer’s service to Christ. A study of the previous chapter would show that it is speaking to the same theme which is fellowship. The Spirit through the apostle teaches us about issues with faith (14:1-12) and issues with food which affected their fellowship (14:13-23). All of these issues could provoke strife within the church body.

Today we are going to consider what the Bible has to say about Christian fellowship. This message should not be overlooked. I would point out how potentially divisive problems in a church are dealt with more positively than negatively in this passage. We cannot serve God acceptably if we are not in good fellowship with the brethren. It is similar to the Bible’s instructions concerning marriage. Spouses should delight to meet beloved’s needs. When selfishness rears its ugly head in a marriage, it will only provoke selfishness in return. Even so, a church is a body where each part is better off by delighting to meet the needs of all other parts. In other words, I fellowship best by giving my brothers and sisters what they really need, not what I want. In so doing I am actually helping and bettering myself.

Do you think that fail to think of fellowship within the local church as a doctrinal issue? That means I have no right to withdraw from active fellowship. Of course, just because we understand what God expects, that does not mean others understand and accept it. God used John, the beloved disciple, to stress this important necessity. In 1 John 2:9-10, **“He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now. He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him.”**

**The Pattern of Fellowship (1-7).**

We are first instructed as to the pattern of fellowship. Specific imperatives are mentioned. It begins with the decision to willingly yield or submit ourselves to others. Those who are spiritually strong ought to bear the infirmities of those who are weak spiritually. Bearing means can mean putting up with their selfishness. Of course, those who are weak spiritually are usually convinced that you are the one with the problem. Nevertheless, God expects us to gladly, not grudgingly, put what is good for others before what we are convinced would be good for ourselves. And we do so, not for their sake alone, but for Christ’s sake.

I do point out that this is always in reference to non-essential matters. We ought never to compromise doctrine or righteousness for the sake of unity. It also does not mean we can never rebuke wrong attitudes and actions, if rebuke is needed. But always remember that the right to rebuke others is earned by personal consistency. No one should set about pulling splinters from other eyes while having a beam protruding from their own.

Are you thinking, “Pastor Oetman, that’s asking too much!” I ask you to notice what verse 3 says. “Christ pleased not Himself.” It is true that if we constantly yielded to the weaker brother, for their sake, it is possible that we might grow weary in our well-doing. Then we might be tempted to assume a condescending spirit toward those that are weak and in constant need of nursing, as it were. But we are to do so for the Lord’s sake because He has certainly done so toward us!

Because the Lord Jesus lived to please His heavenly Father, He served and helped sinful men. He did so even till unjust and undeserved reproaches fell on Him. In so doing he fulfilled Psalm 69:9. “For the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up; and the reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me.” That is a Messianic Psalm written to describe some of the dark and lonely days of David’s life. He had been Israel’s hero and giant killer, yet when he penned those Words through divine inspiration, he had been reduced to being the object of national scorn and ridicule in the songs of drunkards.

The Lord Jesus was similarly rejected after doing the nation of Israel much good. He had freely fed thousands, healed multitudes, and even raised the dead. Yet, they would not receive Him. All that He did was for the sake of obeying His Father’s will. It was not because any man deserved His graceful and merciful works!

David was not divine and full of grace. He was a man like you and me. He expected his good deeds would be remembered with respect. Christ, however, knew better, yet He behaved selflessly at all times. Verse 4 is significant. It is one that should be underlined in our Bibles and memorized. All that was written in the Old Testament was for our learning that we through patience (and how badly we need to practice patience!) and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.

We need the hope promised here. Have you ever felt all used up in your well-doing? Have your brothers and sisters in Christ worn you out with their demands and expectations of entitlement and unthankfulness? Having a spirit of charity and selflessness is a good thing. Having the spirit of Christ is far better. That is why Paul prayed that the God of patience and consolation would grant them to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus (verse 5).

Sometimes we give up on people too quickly. Don’t believe the constantly repeated lie that people can’t change. All things are possible with God. But it might require an extra measure of patience from us. We may need some divine consolation in order to receive into fellowship someone who keeps making the same mistakes. But before we lose our tempers or wash our hands of that one who never seems to “get it right,” we should remember that Christ freely forgave all our sins.

It glorifies God when we behave with the spirit of Christ. Do you think that you can do that? Has the grace of God wrought a lasting change in you? Even if others follow after the way of Diotrephes who loved having the preeminence (3 John 9-10), may God find us doing the opposite and behaving in a way that resembles His Son. That is the patten of fellowship God expects to find in His people.

**The Purpose of Fellowship (8-9).**

Next, we find the purpose of fellowship stated in our text. Jesus Christ was a minister (literally “servant”) of the circumcision for the truth of God. This simply means that Christ Jesus was a Jew. In the sovereignty of God, the Saviour was made a Jew after human flesh and confirmed the promises God had made to Abraham. However, He also came that, **“Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy.”** Psalm 18:49 is then alluded to in reference. “Therefore will I give thanks unto thee, O Lord, among the heathen, and sing praises unto thy name.” So we see that the purpose of fellowship is to praise God.

In Christ Jesus, Jews who were under the Abrahamic Covenant and Gentiles who were excluded from it, are combined and made one (Galatians 3:28-29). “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither make nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

In the local New Testament Church, we are become the body of Christ, and our purpose is to sing the praise of His glory (Isaiah 12:1-6). Anything that works contrary to that purpose is wrong and sinful. I must repeat that imperative. Anything that works contrary to peace and harmony in the local church is wrong and sinful. Peter demonstrated partiality in fellowship with Gentile brethren when Jews came from Jerusalem, and therefore Paul rebuked him before all because he sinned openly (Galatians 2:11-14).

That really is our primary purpose as church members. Yes, we want to build up this church by evangelizing the lost and through discipling new believers. We want to oppose error and exalt good doctrine. We want to fulfill, to the best of our ability, the Great Commission. But our primary purpose is to be “to the praise of the glory of His grace, wherein He hath made us **accepted in the beloved**” (Ephesians 1:6).

**The Privilege of Fellowship (10-12).**

The referencing of Old Testament Messianic passages continues once more after the expression of the purpose of fellowship. All three passages cited (in Deuteronomy 32:43; **Psalm 117:1**; and Isaiah 11:1, 10) emphasize the privilege that belongs to us as church members. Even in Old Testament times, God’s Word called upon Gentiles to praise the Lord with rejoicing. Gentiles would put their faith and trust in the Root of Jesse. Some chafe at the Bible’s descriptions of the privilege of the Jews. But far greater is the privilege of being a member of a New Testament Church of Jesus Christ!

We know that many millions of Gentiles have trusted in Christ since He arose from the grave while few Jews believe in their own Messiah. What great privilege we enjoy! Israel once enjoyed a place of remarkable privilege, but their lack of faith resulted in their being set aside. This is not a permanent displacement. Israel is not finished in God’s dealings with man. They will once again occupy a place of privilege. But that will not occur till they go through the unprecedented horrors of the Tribulation Period.

Till then members of the body of Christ occupy the primary place of privilege. God is using us to accomplish His work and will. God always works through a small remnant. Do you feel like a privileged child of God and servant of King Jesus Christ? Without participating in church fellowship, none of us can experience the privileged life. In all the long years when God accomplished His work and will through Israel, few in the nation felt privileged. That is because they were fussing with each other and ignoring God’s Word. May God help us to make full use of the privilege shown us in Christ Jesus!

**The Power of Fellowship (13).**

Though this sounds rather like a benediction, the Epistle is not done yet. But let’s not overlook something significant. Paul desired that God would fill them with all joy and peace in believing (because unbelief gets you nothing virtuous at all), that they might abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost. The filling and empowering of the Holy Ghost are usually considered from an individual perspective. But the context here is corporate. The church as the body of Christ is in mind.

On the day of Pentecost, it was not a few members of the first church at Jerusalem who were filled with the Holy Spirit; it was that whole church. Imagine what God might do through our church if we were to abound in hope through the power of the Holy Spirit? How concerned are you about being filled with the Holy Spirit of God?

It won’t happen if we are indifferently focused on the exercise of our own liberty to the hurt and discouragement of others. When the grace of God changes us and causes us to resemble our Saviour it will always encourage the others in the church. We rejoice when God blesses our brothers or sisters. May God help us to serve Him and one another in a selfless way after the example of our Lord and Saviour! Then our fellowship will be what Scripture demands and what glorifies our Saviour. And it will bring us great joy. It will empower our witness and allow us to accomplish mighty works that we could never have done on our own.