

Romans 15:1-6 NIV

“Ricky was wrong”

“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.’

(4) For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. (5) May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, (6) so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

This text teaches a superb thought.

It’s about helping others.

Assisting folks to safety.

We rarely walk places anymore.

I hear about old farmers who wouldn’t even walk to their barns.

They’d drive a pickup, a jeep, a 4-wheeler, a motorcycle—anything so they wouldn’t have to walk 40 yards.

Some city folks drive around parking lots so they won’t have to walk 40 feet.

Not many generations ago, people walked everywhere.

No vehicles existed.

No motorized wheelchairs or hover-
rounds for disabled and elderly people.

When I was young in Kansas, I often saw a disabled high school student whose friends and relatives pulled him in a wagon. That’s how he got to school and to his various classes—others pulled him in a red wagon.

Much has changed since the 1940s.

Imagine a large group walking a steep, narrow, and rocky path.

Mention the term “rocky road” to young people and they think about ice cream.

Think how much life has changed.

If you've climbed a cow path in the hills, you know the challenges of walking.

Unexpected things can trip you.

Sometimes the path is a rocky road.

Vines, loose gravel, and branches can put you on your knees or back.



Or sprain your ankle or knee.

Romans 14: 13 uses that imagery: "Make up your mind not to put a stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way."

Stumbling blocks and obstacles suggest walking, don't they?

Our text relates to walking, also: "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves."

As much as any Bible text, this one troubles me.

Believing in God is not my challenge.

I rarely doubt God exists.

Applying my faith gives me difficulty at times.

Who are these "weak" people the Lord wants me to help?

Why do I have to help them?

How do I help these "weak" people?

Three brief stories help me explain.

Two are true, one imaginary.

In 1980 Norma and I spent eight days in Israel.

We toured with mostly Jewish people from this country.

All week long, our Jewish guide talked about going to the "Jerusalem of Gold Nightclub" in Jerusalem. We repeatedly told him that we weren't "night club" people. He assured us that it wasn't like a Chicago, LA, or New York type night club. It resembled a family variety show, he said. In fact it was a "General Audience" type of program.

The night finally came and he took us to the nightclub at the Southwest edge of Jerusalem near the Valley of Hinnom.¹

¹ The term gehenna or hell is derived from ghi hinnom

A Jewish couple from New Jersey, whom we befriended and spent considerable time, also attended.

Herschel spoke correctly. We saw a general audience variety show.

Still the experience frightened us and our New Jersey friends some—and not because of our proximity to “Gehenna.”

If you’ve been in school gymnasiums built in the 1920s and 30s, you can picture the club.

A set of stairs led to a balcony on three sides of the big room.

Crowds of folks sat on the floor next to the performers.

Ushers led us upstairs to the opposite side of the building and seated us at the far edge of the balcony.

That meant that in case of fire, we would be the last out. The only exit was actually below us.



Valley of Hinnom Jerusalem

People sat on the stairs leading to the balcony. They packed the house made the situation a fire marshal’s nightmare.

We and the other couple discussed emergency escape plans. We were seated on the second story with large windows behind us. In case of fire, folks would panic and clog the only exit below us.

As exists now, tension was high in Israel then. A service station not far away was firebombed a few weeks after we got home. We discussed possible news headlines in LA.: **“Hollywood minister and his wife die in Jerusalem nightclub fire.”**

Our friends and we came up with a plan.

We spotted some objects with which we could break the windows, if necessary. The other fellow and I would break the windows, leap to the ground. The girls would jump once we were set. We didn’t discuss the other people.

They’d have to take care of themselves.

I’m ashamed to say that I don’t remember talking about helping anyone else.

All were strangers.

“Everybody for himself.”

Life gets that way at times, doesn't it?

As the old prayer went:

“Dear Lord, Take care of me, my wife
and my son John.
Amen.”

Imagine that we're all partying.

- Having a good time.
 - Dancing.
- Telling jokes.
 - Visiting.
- Whooping it up.
 - Lots of laughter.
- Lots of stories.
 - No worries.



A terrorist breaks in and tosses a grenade.

The grenade rolls near.

We're all going to die.

Another person comes into the room.

Not a partier.

He sees the danger and throws himself
on the grenade.

Sacrifices himself.

Yet the disaster isn't over.

The party-place is aflame.

Everyone must get out.

- Some are injured.
 - Many are confused.
- Others can't see the way.

It resembles 9-11 in New York.

Confusion.

Danger everywhere.

No one knows what will happen next.

**But unlike at the World Trade Center,
everyone can get out . . .**

All can escape alive.

Feeble folks.

Injured folks.

Disabled.

Big.

Little,

Young.

Old.

Every color.

No one needs to perish.

Everyone can make it.

How?

The strong help the weak.

Act as unselfishly as the guy who threw himself on the grenade.

And something else.

Few people think about it.

The weak also should encourage the strong.

“Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.”

Ricky Nelson was right in the sense that you can't please everyone. He wrongly thought, though, that we should just live to please ourselves.

Christians build others up—help others grow stronger.

They don't just look out for themselves.

“For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.’”

Our world is in flames.

Falling apart.

Melting down.

Hate, bitterness, and anger intensify distress.

People blame others and point fingers.

That only worsens the situation.

Fixing blame heals nothing.

Only encouraging others, patience, and sacrifice heal.

Only Christ's love changes people.

It happened just across the Blue Ridge from Front Royal, Virginia, in one of the most beautiful spots in the whole area. In 1861 young Albert Willis was a theological student. He was preparing himself to be a preacher. Like many others he left his studies to enter the Confederate Army and became a member of Mosby's Rangers.

While he was not a chaplain, he did carry on religious work among the men, giving them Bibles and holding religious services in his regiment.

On October the 1, 1864, he was granted a furlough and was riding south to Culpepper, hoping to reach his home in that County. Not far from Flint Hill his horse lost a shoe. He stopped at a crossroad known as Gaines Mill, where there was a rickety old blacksmith shop.

It had been raining, so while his horse was being shod, he stood near the fire drying his boots. The beating of the hammer on the anvil drowned out the sound of approaching horses. A company of Federal soldiers rode up. Willis was taken captive, and taken outside where there was another prisoner.

The two Confederates were told that one of them must die in reprisal for the death of a Federal soldier who had been hanged the day before by Mosby's men. Such acts seem terrible today, but they were not uncommon on both sides when Mosby's men ranged and raided.

The captives were carried before General William H. Powell, Union Cavalry leader. Someone told Powell that Willis was a

chaplain and General Powell said to him, "If you are a chaplain, your life will be spared."

The young Confederate replied, "I am not a chaplain; I am a soldier fighting in the ranks." General Powell then told the two captives that one of them would be hanged within the hour. They would be given straws, and the lot would determine which would be hanged. The straws were given.

The lot was cast. Willis's companion drew the short straw and was doomed to be hanged. The soldiers were about to carry out the execution when young Willis appealed to General Powell.

He said, "This man is a married man and a large family is dependent on him. I am single and there is no dependent on me. Furthermore, this man is not a Christian, and he is not ready to die. I am a Christian and not afraid to die. Let me take his place and let me die in his stead."



Moved by his appeal, General Powell allowed him to take the place of the doomed man.

A rope was placed around young Willis's neck and the other end was tied to a limb from a poplar tree, which had been pulled down by the weight of several soldiers.

While the preparations were being made, the young man knelt and prayed. One who was there said that he had never heard a more beautiful prayer, or one so entirely lacking in bitterness. When the prayer finished, the men released the limb . . .²

I think young Willis knew our text today:

“We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: ‘The

insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.’”

Jesus threw himself on the grenade.

Took the short straw.

Asked for the rope to be tied around his neck.

Think of the wrongs we commit.

Whether they include: lies, violence, illegal acts, drunkenness, hateful speech, and hateful things, Jesus paid for all of them.

He paid for those who spit on him, pounded the nails into his hands, and killed him.

He posted bail for us, so to speak.

I pray that I'll more fully live for him.

I pray that you will, too.

It's the only way to walk—the only way to win the big battle.

The victory that overcomes the world is faith in Christ and acting as he did.

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² The above illustration was adapted from *On Vesper Hill* with Robert Lapsely, Jr. p-55