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BEARING WITH THE WEAK

(Following is the message, based on Chapter 15 of Romans, that I shared at the Vineyard church on January 1st.)

What we believe about God is the single most important fact about our life. What we believe about God, not what we say we believe but what we really believe, inside, in our hearts, determines everything about how we live, our goals and values, our lifestyle, how we spend our time, how we spend our money, how we treat our family, the friends we have, and how we feel about dying.

And the book of Romans is like the Mt. Everest of the Bible. It is the single grandest expression of the revelation of our amazing God and his incomprehensible love for us, and of his design to fold us into his purpose for creating the universe. My assignment today is Romans 15, the penultimate chapter. Since we are coming to the end of this grand book, let me share a brief overview:

Paul starts his letter to the Romans as follows: *Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God - - the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son.....*(Ro. 1:1-3a, NIV)

This book, and the entire New Testament, is about "*The gospel of God.*" The word "gospel" is the Greek word *evangelion*, from which we get the word evangelism. *Evangelion* means "Good news." Romans is all about the good news of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The book of Mark starts as follows: *The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* The Bible, and particularly the New Testament, is Good News! It is wonderful news about God: who God is, and his intentions for us.

If there is anything in our understanding of God that seems to us to be bad news, then we are confused, or we are deceived.

If we perceive God to be cruel or unfair or unfeeling, if we think God is against us, or that he doesn't care about us or our loved ones, then we are believing a lie! If we think that God wants to condemn us, or that he is a tyrant, and if we are afraid to really trust him with our life, then we are deceived. That is not God!

This is how God is revealed in the Bible:

GOD IS LIGHT, AND IN HIM THERE IS NO DARKNESS (no evil) AT ALL.

GOD IS LOVE. (His essence, his nature, his very being, is love.)

FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON.

I CAME TO GIVE YOU LIFE, ABUNDANT LIFE.

Friends, this is Good News! In this dark world with so much bad news, isn't it great to come to church today and hear

some good news?

So what does the book of Romans tell us about God? Paul's letters are generally divided into two parts:

FIRST PART - is doctrine, giving us the amazing revelation of who God is. The first part of Romans also tells about man, the gulf that separates us from God, and how God rescues us.

SECOND PART - contains practical implications; that is, how we are supposed to live out our faith.

So in the book of Romans, the first 11 chapters address the questions: "Who is God?" and "Who is man?" Chapter 3 describes man's sinfulness and lostness:

There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks after God....no one who does good...their tongues practice deceit....their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness....their feet are swift to shed blood....there is no fear of God before their eyes. (Ro. 3:10-18, selected)

We might think, That is pretty harsh. But that is the way God sees us! If we look at the condition of our world, perhaps we can start to comprehend. Our condition is hopeless. We cannot measure up to God's righteous commandments. We cannot. We cannot bridge that vast gulf between us and God. And so God has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He has provided a way for us where there was no way through the sacrifice of his Son on the cross.

Romans 3:21-22 says, *But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known.....This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*

The theme of the book of Romans is A RIGHTEOUSNESS FROM GOD, RECEIVED BY FAITH.

Romans chapters 1 through 11 contain the revelation of the doctrine of God and man. Chapter 12 starts with the word, "Therefore." Paul is saying, "Therefore - In view of all that God has revealed in these past 11 chapters, now I am going to present the implications for us. I am going to tell you how we are to live."

Paul writes, by inspiration from the Holy Spirit: *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing, and perfect will.*

Note what the Bible does not say. It does not say that: "If you just believe that Jesus was the son of God and died for our sins, then God puts an invisible mark on your forehead,

like a barcode, and then everything is cool between you and God. You are definitely going to heaven. And so you can relax and go on and live your life any way you want to." That is apparently what a lot of Christians believe based on how they live, but that is just mental belief, just religion. It hasn't gotten into their hearts and changed their lives.

God does not just want us to agree with what the Bible says, he wants our life! Let me stop there for a moment to explain. Probably most everyone in here understands this, but perhaps there are a few who don't understand. This is crucial. Many agree with what the New Testament says: "Jesus was the Son of God, he lived a sinless life and died on the cross for our sins. Then he was resurrected from the grave." Well, that's nice that you believe those things, but the Bible indicates that even the demons believe those things, but that doesn't make them Christians. The question is, do you believe those things in your heart? I don't know how to explain it, but the Bible says that when you believe in Christ in your heart, the seat of your personality and will, the Holy Spirit comes inside and drastically changes your life. Then you are inspired to start living for him.

Romans 12:1 tells us to "*Offer your bodies*" or "*Present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God.*" Wow! That is extreme. I don't know about you, but my body seems to have a mind of its own. It does not want to go along with the program. Romans 1:6 says that you and I (believers) *are called to belong to Jesus Christ*. This is not an anomaly. Paul also declares in his epistles that "*We have been bought with a price, so we are no longer our own,*" and that are to be "*slaves of God.*" Good night! There is a huge difference between being a luke-warm church member and being a slave for God. God saves each of us for a radical purpose: to live for him, in the darkness of this world to bear his light.

Now we can look at Romans, chapter 15. This is a part of the second section, the implications for believers. Remember, the first section is doctrine, revealing who God is. The second section tells us what this means for us. This is how we are to live. And what does it say? **It tells us we are to live a life of love.** Wait a minute! Is that all? Just live a life of love? As if that is easy. The description of love in the Bible is not easy at all, it's impossible apart from God's help.

Romans 15 starts, *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."* We are to bear with the weak. The "weak." That's you and me. That's all of us. Christ took our insults, he took our pains and sorrows, he bears with our many shortcomings and failures. Friends, this is not just "doctrine," not academic, it is real, personal, and individual.

Many years ago, when I was a pastor, there was a time when I was depressed, angry, and disappointed with God. I was thinking, "God is not fair. He has not kept his promises to me. He is not really for me. Poor me!" I was deceived. I was also angry and disappointed with myself. I considered myself to be a loser and a failure in every way. And in the midst of that time of hopelessness, the Lord came and stood right next to me and poured his love over me for one full hour. I was

totally and completely undeserving of his mercy and compassion. That is who God is. I was renewed and refreshed. God did not rescue me by an argument but by his presence. His presence changes everything. Remember Job. Over the course of my Christian life, God has rescued me many times....because I have messed up so many times, and because of his grace. I'm sure you have had similar experiences, because he really cares for us and is not looking for an excuse to kick us off the bus.

The Lord bears with our weaknesses: our character flaws, stubbornness and dumb decisions. And God wants us to bear with the weaknesses of others. That is an important part of what it means to be "Christlike." And it starts with bearing with the weaknesses of those in our own **family**. If you have been married for a while, you may have noticed that there are certain things that your husband or wife does that are irritating. Certain habits or mannerisms that drive you up the wall. Ways that they are insensitive, selfish and inconsiderate. True? (If you are sitting next to your spouse, do not nod your head.) This may come as a shock to you, but there are things you do that really bother your spouse! If we are going to stay married and live together in peace, we must learn to bear with one another's weaknesses.

Back in the 1970's when I was a pastor in Loveland, I got acquainted with a young couple. The husband was a professional man, and his wife was a beautiful young woman who could have been a model. She was the daughter of a physician. After they had been married for several years, this young wife had a severe stroke that left one side paralyzed and affected her brain. She could not talk except for making sounds, and she drooled. I remember Doris and I going out to dinner with this family on one occasion, and every few minutes her husband reached over with a napkin and wiped her chin. He was not embarrassed or apologetic. This was his wife, and he was committed to her in sickness and in health. Wow! That made such an impression on me that I still clearly remember it after 40 years.

It is common that when a spouse develops a chronic disease that she or he is abandoned by their husband or wife. The same thing happens many times when a couple has a child that is born with a severe disease or deformity - autism, mongoloidism, etc. I am not judging anyone who has abandoned his or her family under such circumstances. The pressures are incredible. We really need God's help to bear with such weaknesses.

It starts with our **family**, and then we need to bear with the weaknesses of people we work with or go to school with. There are some 250,000 episodes of workplace violence in the U.S. each year. And then we need to reach out and bear with the weaknesses of people in the world.

Tony Campolo relates the following story: He flew into Hawaii, arrived at 3:00 AM, and had severe jet lag. The only place he could find to get a cup of coffee was a bar. He said it was smoky and noisy with a lot of folks who had been drinking too much. Then a bunch of prostitutes came in. He heard one of the gals say, "Tomorrow is my birthday." She got a sarcastic response from the other girls. Tony asked the bartender, "What's the name of that girl?" He said, "Agnes." "Do they come in every night?" "Yeah." "Let's have a

birthday party tomorrow night, I will pay for it." The next night was even busier and the bar was bedlam. But over against the wall was a table with a birthday cake, candles, balloons, snacks. And on the wall was a big banner that said, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" Agnes was shocked. She stood still and tears started rolling down her face. She said, "This is the first time I've ever had a birthday party." She asked, "Can I keep the cake?" Tony said, "It's your cake."

The party got everyone's attention and the bar sort of quieted down, so Tony asked the bartender if he could say a few words. He preached the gospel very simply. He told everyone, and especially the girls, "God is not angry at you. He is not judging you. He loves you." A number of the girls accepted Christ that night. Later the bartender said, "I didn't know you were a preacher." Tony said, "I'm not a preacher, I'm a sociologist." "What kind of church do you go to?" Tony replied, "A church that gives birthday cakes to prostitutes." The bartender said, "There isn't any such church. If there was, I would join it." Hey, let's be that kind of church. OK? That's a good New Year's resolution.

I spent the first two weeks of December on a short term mission to Guadalajara, Mexico, ministering in a number of different churches. One of the memories I came home with is about a young single mother, Rosa, and her little son, Edgar. Edgar is mentally and physically disabled and was in a wheelchair. They had been abandoned by Edgar's father. I prayed with them on three different evenings, and finally Rosa started weeping and poured out the fear in her heart. She said, "If Edgar is not healed, what is going to happen to him?" An experience from the past came to my mind, and I shared it with Rosa. In January of 1973, I was the pastor of a big Methodist church when I received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. (It was another of God's rescue missions for me.) On the first Sunday after that experience, as I stood at the rear of the sanctuary and shook hands with people as they left, God gave me a unique experience. He gave me the gift of "discerning of spirits," one of the gifts of the Spirit listed in 1 Corinthians 12. The way it worked with me at that time was that by a burning in my heart as people approached me I discerned where each person was spiritually. Some of the people were hot, some were warm, and some were icy cold - they were lost, they did not know God. Then two young women who came to church together every Sunday approached me arm in arm. They were mentally challenged and lived in a group home. As they approached, my heart started burning hotter and hotter. I looked at them in amazement. Although society would judge them to have pathetic lives, God saw that they were giving him all they had. He loved them so much.

I said to Rosa: Rosa, unless God supernaturally heals Edgar, he will live a diminished life, but Edgar is OK with God. He is safe in the arms of a God who loves him more than we can imagine. And Rosa, the life ahead of you is scary. It will be a life of sacrifice. It will be a life that from the point of view of the world is unappealing and undesirable. But that is exactly the kind of life that Jesus led - from the point of view of the world. But from God's point of view, it was a glorious, victorious life. That is the kind of life that God has called you to live, and in fact it is the kind of life, with

different specifics, that he calls every one of his followers to live. It is how Christ is formed in us.

I know that Rosa's life is similar to the life that many of you are living. Some of you are raising a mentally or physically disabled child. Some are taking care of a mother or father or spouse who is declining with Alzheimer's. Some are raising your grandchildren. Some have adopted children that are turning out to be difficult far beyond your expectations. Some are suffering in your body with M.S., or diabetes, or cancer, or nerve damage. As you know, being a Christian doesn't wrap us in a bubble to protect us from the vagaries and sufferings of this life, and in fact, Jesus told us that if we live godly lives there will be an added element of persecution.

But if the Bible is true, if this really is the revelation of the Creator, the One and only God, and if we believe in him (according to the Bible definition of belief) - - if we trust him, surrender to him, obey him, follow him, give him everything - and when we fall down we get up and start again - we cannot lose! God assures us that "*All things* (even what we deem to be awful things) *work for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*" That is part of the glorious revelation that is given to us in the book of Romans - Romans 8:28.

On the other hand, and there is another hand according to the Bible, if you reject him you will lose your life eternal. Some may say, "I am not going to decide yet. I will just stay on the fence for a while longer." There is no fence. Jesus said, *Those who are not for me are against me.*

As I was finishing my preparation of this message, a strong impression came to me that I believe was from God. It was for those who would hear this message preached, but I think it may also apply to those who read it. The impression that came was, "Someone who hears this message is coming to a fork in the road. They have been thinking about taking a certain path for a period of time. They know in their heart that it is not right and is dangerous, but they are drawn in an overpowering way to take that path. (Perhaps it is the path of suicide.) God is speaking to you at the beginning of this New Year, and he is warning you, imploring you, Don't do it! It is the path of destruction.' Your Father says, Turn to me and I will give you strength and grace to take the path of life." Amen.

Benediction: Romans 15:5-6 says that our God gives us *endurance and encouragement.* We need a lot of that. Where else are you gonna get it? From a bottle? I tried that. It doesn't work too good.

And Romans 15:13 says, *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.* The "God of Hope!" Don't you love it!

Blessings to you all,

Glenn

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