

A Deference Design

The Specific Shape of Love in Romans

A Prep Guide for Sessions 8

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Ask most Christians - actually, most people - to summarize how we ought to behave, and they'll use the word "love." Songs from across the generations chronicle it. Burt Bacharach's 1960s hit, "What the World Needs Now Is Love Sweet Love" has been covered by prominent artists in every decade since. Stevie Wonder's "Love's In Need of Love Today," came in the '70s, as did England Dan and John Ford Coley's "Love is the Answer." The Black Eyed Peas" dropped "Where is the Love in 2004," and so on, and so on.

Of course, Jesus gave us a 20-century-old lyric when he told his disciples, "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All people will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." A folk group shortened it to, "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love." We all think love is a good idea, but what does it look like? Is it a favorable emotion? Or a generous form of behavior? Or both? We The angel is in the details.

Our final session will open for us a very specific application of neighbor love. Paul imagines that the Romans are dealing with an issue similar to one he treats extensively in 1 Corinthians 8–10: how Christians ought to navigate issues of food that has been sacrificed to idols and other observances related to religion. As he does this, he pictures a deferential love that puts the other before the self. This ethic is not uncommon in Paul's letters (e.g., Phil 2.1-4). But the specific way that the apostle applies it here can help 21st-century Christians with some of our main issues. So let's read together.

Below is a brief suggestion of other Pauline passages you can read to help put Romans 14–15 in context. I will update this prep guide in full form in your Tuesday e-mail. I apologize for the inconvenience of waiting.

Shifting the Center of Gravity

In chapter 14, Paul raises talks about food that some will eat and others will not eat out of conscience and days that some observe and others do not. In this context, he commends to the Romans a way of doing the world that is alien to a culture - 1st-

century and 21st century culture – that enculturates a self-centered walk through life. To expand your data, I have two passages I suggest you read alongside this one:

1. 1 Corinthians 8–10 all address the specific issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols about which the Corinthians themselves have written to ask Paul. In it, Paul mediates between two groups that he calls the strong and the weak. Read the section as context for Romans 14–15, asking yourself whether we are dealing with the same issue, a similar issue, or a relatively unconnected issue there.
2. In Philippians 2.1-11, Paul calls his brothers and sisters to consider first the needs of others, ultimately presenting Jesus' incarnation and self-sacrifice as the ultimate example of this deferential way of life. Take a look at this passage and ask how Paul's point there relates to the counsel he gives the Romans in chapters 14–15.

Other passages may also come to mind for you.

Romans 14–15 and Our Worship Wars

Followers of Jesus have sung together since our earliest days. It was part of our inheritance from Judaism. On Maundy Thursday each year, we remember that after their Passover supper together, Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn before walking out to the Mount of Olives. The very first outsider account of Christianity – the letter of Pliny the Younger's to the Emperor Trajan -- about Christian customs includes songs. As the Governor of Bithynia (now northern Turkey), Pliny investigated and persecuted the churches, but he had questions about how to proceed and pinged the Emperor. Here's how he summarized the info his spies had gathered from their interrogation of Christians.

They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to do some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food – but ordinary and innocent food.

In 20th and 21st century Christianity, Christians have often stopped singing together due to differences in taste. In a bit of well-intended hyperbole, some call the conflict our “Worship Wars.” Will our worship feature traditional hymns or contemporary worship songs, an organ or a guitar-bass-piano-drums ensemble? You have probably experienced the tension at least once in a church near you.

As you read Romans 14–15, ask yourself how Paul’s counsel on issues of food and holidays can help 21st-century Christians navigate the worship wars. Ask what principles in Paul’s approach to their issues seem relevant or applicable to this specific current ecclesiastical issue in our time.

Back Home Again

The great English writer George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) begins her *Middlemarch* (the best novel ever written in English, IMHO), with a one-page reflection on the precocious childhood and brilliant religious success of St. Theresa of Avila, a woman of massive spirit who changed the world through her religious order. Then she tells for hundreds of pages the story of a woman called Dorothea, who also has a massive spirit, but whose grandness has gotten stymied by the restrictive, unsuitable social setting of a 19th-century English village, with its cultures and mores. Finally, in the last page of the novel, Theresa is back:

A new Theresa will hardly have the opportunity of reforming a conventual life, any more than a new Antigone will spend her heroic piety in daring all for the sake of a brother’s burial: the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is forever gone. But we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know.

After she has presented the sometimes tragic and much-maligned life of her large-hearted, aspirational heroine Dorothea, Eliot helps us imagine for a moment what Dorothea could have been and done in another time and place. “She could have been a Theresa!” is her implicit claim, with the not-so-subtle hint that what kept her from it was the stultifying culture in which Eliot’s readers participated. Eliot’s literary design is A-B-A, with the two Theresa-shaped A pieces being tiny, and the Dorothea-tracking B piece, huge.

Great writers of plays or novels or movies or TV shows OR SERMONS move their audience from point A to point B and then back to point A again, but different than they were when the work began. That's what Paul does, too.

- ◇ Move A - The Good News about Jesus the Messiah
In chapter 1.2-17, he describes his good news about Jesus the Messiah, of which he is by no means ashamed.
- ◇ Move B - The Spelling Out of That Good News
In the long stretch from Romans 1.18 through 15.6, he lays out that good news:
 - the human predicament (1.18–3.20),
 - God's divine solution and rescue through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (3.21-4.26),
 - the way that solution changes individual lives (Romans 5–8),
 - fits within the encompassing plan of God to bless and save all peoples (9–11),
 - and finally to its general (12–13) and specific (14–15.6) impact that good news has community life.
- ◇ Move A Revisited - Good News Redux
In 15.7-16, Paul finally returns to give a freshly-seasoned presentation of Jesus the Messiah.

As with George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, we understand the method to Paul's literary madness much more fully having read Move B. In those intervening chapters, Paul has indicated the problematic that makes his good news so powerful: because God has extended chosen-ness to all peoples in Christ, now Jews and Gentiles must learn to live side-by-side as equal brothers and sisters in Christ.

Accordingly, in the final act of his cosmic story, Paul revisits his claim about Jesus the Messiah and the salvation of "everyone who has faith, the Jew first and also the Greek" from 1.17. But now he does it with a string of scriptures that drive home the strong theme of God's love for the nations - the Gentiles. (Both "nations" and "Gentiles" translate Gk: TA ETHNA)

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. ⁸For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed ⁹and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written:

*"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;
I will sing the praises of your name."*

¹⁰ Again, it says,

"Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people."

¹¹ And again,

*"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles;
let all the peoples extol him."*

¹² And again, Isaiah says,

*"The Root of Jesse will spring up,
one who will arise to rule over the nations;
in him the Gentiles will hope."*

¹³ 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.

Paul has brought us back home again, but we have grown quite a lot since our first moments with the letter. When we began reading Romans together seven weeks ago, some of us might have thought Paul's good news is merely about your salvation and mine. Now we know how much bigger it is than that - that it chronicles nothing less than the encompassing rescue of all humanity through the one man, Jesus Messiah, who gives us all access to, and puts us all on level footing before, God. Then it claims that the rescue narrative continues through little outposts of the Messiah, churches like yours and mine and the ones in Rome, who realize with Paul that when we embody God's bringing together of opposites, God's remarkable demolition of walls that divide us, we "preach the gospel" without ever scaling a rostrum.

If Paul's letter succeeded in its ancient setting, the Romans, who were divided by ethnicity and religious history, finally came to realize that they were called to be the unified body of this wall-breaking Messiah. If it succeeds among us, so will you and I.

The Travel Plans

The rest of the letter can seem mundane. Paul reminds them of his job (apostle to the Gentiles), announces his hope to meet them someday, and plants a seed for their support in of his mission.

But if we look again, this brief travel plan reminds us that Paul is in the business of practicing what he preaches. He believes that this good news is for all peoples, all nations, all Jews and all Gentiles, and he hopes, therefore, to extend the reach of God's good news all the way Spain.

The shape of Paul's mission explains why he hasn't gotten to Rome yet. Some in Rome might take his inattention as a form of disrespect. "Why haven't you been here?!" Others may have thought him a lesser apostle because he hasn't yet connected with them. "Maybe someday your off-Broadway show will be ready for our stages." For Paul, though, the cause was vocational. We noticed in Session 6 that Christianity probably reached Rome along Jewish trade routes at least a decade before Paul's letter. So Paul explains...

It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation. ²¹ Rather, as it is written:

*"Those who were not told about him will see,
and those who have not heard will understand."*

²² This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you.

Nonetheless, he hopes to see them - partly, of course, "so that we may be mutually encouraged by one another's faith" (Romans 1.15); but mostly because he's run out of unevangelized cities in Turkey and Greece.

Now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to visit you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. (Romans 15.25-27)

He has a bit more work attending to churches he's already planted and taking an offering from those (Gentile) churches to the mother ship (Jewish) churches in Judaea.

They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings

Breaking down walls 'til the end!

The Contact List

In Romans 16, Paul greets a passel of people in the Roman house churches. We talked a bit about this in our very first session, as we began to picture who might be in the various Roman living rooms as Paul's letter is read out among them. We noticed then that scholars have detected in the list of names a wildly diverse group, ethnically, socio-economically, in gender, and in a few other ways. On Wednesday, we'll close our time by revisiting that list to ask what, beyond mere greeting, might be Paul's purpose for this – the longest list of greetings in any of his letters.

Conclusion

In closing, I had better bring us back to where I began this Prep Guide: with the centrality of Christian love in the closing chapters of Paul's Romans.

We began our journey through Paul's magnum opus by imagining ourselves in an ancient Roman living room, anticipating the literate voice that would read this letter out to us. Now, as we close, we will sit in that ancient room once again and reflect on the way its good news has landed among first-century and 21st-century people of faith. We'll see how what many westerners have read as a guide to individual salvation is actually, seen through ancient Jewish- and Gentile-Christian eyes, a call to God's profound, other-regarding, wall-breaking love. It is the love that sent Jesus to earth and to cross, and it is the love that makes mundane Christians defer to one another as equals who were all created by God and died for by Jesus. The gospel of God's love implants itself in us, if we will open ourselves, and that is awfully good news!

I look forward to our hour together on Wednesday. In the meantime...

peace.
allen